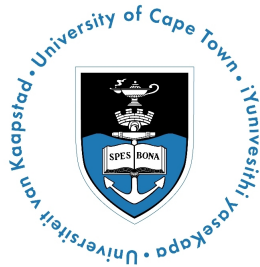


Come to Azania

Jeffrey Webster – WBSJEF001

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Creative Writing



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This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature: _____

Date: _____



**Azania's Face*

Abstract

Vision

Come to Azania is a story that has been growing in my head for a long time. Upon completion of my Bachelor's, with double distinction in English Language and Philosophy, I had fallen in love with literature, and hence decided to give it a go as a career. Having only written short stories and kept a regular journal, I had a lot to learn. For me, this Master's was the perfect opportunity to grow as a writer.

This story had its seeds planted in my head three years ago, when I was 22. I wanted to write something distinctly South African, but also universal, so that the story could serve as satire, as a piece of local speculative fiction. Over many months I created the bifurcated universe in which we find Dalphiney (modelled on Jo'burg, New York, Tokoyo) on the one side, and Azania (overlooking the ruins of Cape Town) on the other. This dichotomous world's regimes and history had to be conceived and made watertight.

On top of this background I sought to impose an operatic story (Star Warsesque). The main character is in many senses like Voltaire's *Candide*; he is a bit of a dupe. Buddy's movement from place to place echoes the bildung genre of character growth, and also reflects his evolutionary urges for survival. The movement from floor to floor in Azania reveals various microcosms and opportunities for character extension. The story involves kinship, inheritance, identity, religious mythology and spans an epic journey from the one world to the other, with the final goal being the character's self-actualisation. The second world, Azania, also has elements of the surreal, as if the place were a dreamscape of Buddy's imagining.

With meaning disguised in Buddy's odyssey, it was, of course, extremely important to keep the reader engaged. Here, in the unfolding of the plot and subplots, we find unique, excessive characters and scenes, all typical of the genres I most love: steam-punk, sci-fi, fantasy, post-apocalyptic.

The resulting hybrid is African 'technological realism', where unprecedented things occur but are not reliant on the supernatural, where the technology is contemporary but the universe is alternative, giving rise to the solar trees, the elevator (Azania's vein), the culling of populations, the research in epi-genetics; there are serious questions of poverty, inequality and identity.

In my initial vision for this book, it was important to incorporate a metatext above the narrative. This manifests, for example, in the main character (and the characters in the

tower) having no defined race. This ambiguity is purposefully maintained throughout, to communicate a universality as well as a lack of identity, and, especially, to draw attention to race.

Buddy's sheltered life in Dalphiney, the city's forgotten history, are all devices. Azania, a type of sweatshop, is a portrayal of African political subservience. Similarly you find the narrator to be untrustworthy, that he is sometimes as naive as Buddy in the telling. I was angling for this kind of detachment, a culpability of the narrator, because his version of the story was so intractable from the allegorical thrust. I also wanted some room for flamboyance and character in the narrative. I wanted the writing to be visible, a personality as well - to be judged. Buddy's guilt, his perversion, is meant to indict the writer.

I have come to love the author Peter Carey above all others, his manner of story telling, which is extremely colourful but also refined. Some of my other influences are Cormac McCarthy, Don DeLillo, Martin Amis, Kurt Vonnegut, Iain Banks, Chuck Palahniuk, Irvine Welsh, H S Thompson, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Gabriel Garcia Marquez. These authors seem to balance what are, in my opinion, the three most crucial tenets of literature: story, lyricism and meaning. And yet their voices are so unique. But I also enjoy many others, whose styles are less extreme, who write exceptionally well, crisply and unimposingly: Margaret Atwood, Philip K Dick, Zakes Mda, Vikram Seth, Ian McEwan, Michael Crichton.

The narration in this work changes style according to which character is in focus. I incorporated my love of film in the assembly of the chapters. And you will notice the text has a bit of plumage, which hopefully will not impede the story-telling.

For me, this Master's program was the first stepping stone in a long process. I believe this work to have value, that within its pages I have not only demonstrated my creativity and literary potential, but also created a unique and entertaining story. This program provided me with a canvas for experimentation and development. I believe this to be the purpose of the course – to nurture writing skills – and although I will admit that this first novel book is not perfect, I can say with confidence that the experience of writing it has made me an exponentially more capable author. I believe my development to be evident in the maturation of the story.

I apologise in advance for the inevitable spelling and grammatical errors which always manage to sneak in. With the close guidance of my supervisor and readers, I have tried to make the text as complete and error free as possible.

I hope you enjoy the story and make it to the end; it is worth it.

Story Outline

(*a comprehensive synopsis is appended after the main text; pg 257)

Meet Buddy Kelly, a soft-spoken insomniac plagued by an incessant ache near the front of his skull. Is it from guilt? He is in this way like the amnesiac on death-row; the cause of his overarching condition eludes him. This restlessness might have something to do with the mysterious circumstances of his sister's death, whose half-hearted suicide attempt was pushed to success by the venomous bite of a Rinkhals. Or it might owe to the disappearance of Winch, Buddy's father, a smooth-talking hulk of a man, a salesman in maniacal pursuit of the 'millionaire deal', a man who loves money enough to endanger his family through his shady dealings.

In any case, Buddy Kelly seems to have constantly tearing eyes, yet presents himself to society as strangely, shyly bold. And he hopes to meet the heroine from his fever dreams.

Buddy Kelly's life is thrown upside down when he receives an anonymous letter, which simply says: *Come to Azania*. Buddy suspects it to be from his father, and the letter sparks a realisation that he is desperate to find and confront the man (does Winch know his daughter is dead?).

Buddy Kelly and his mother live in a tenement in the monstrous metropolis known as Dalphiney. In Dalphiney, people number like frog-spawn in a blackened lake, and on every horizon a cityscape looms like sutures threaded through earth and sky. The city's numberless streets are all lined with hard-armoured trees, with the abject poor like graffiti sprayed everywhere between. Presciently, Dalphiney was made to breath on its own. Powerful political corporations, with a novel sense of ethics, ensure that everything works (granted, with an air of disorder) and the city's underworld is highly evolved.

The old Bard, a Drunk who has seen too much, resides on Dalphiney's unsavoury fringe. Monday night, Tuesday night, you will find him slumped adaptively on a stool in the infamous nightclub Sliver, waiting to spin his tales of 'El Dorado' to anyone who would listen, a place where gold dust stirs in the streets.

Chester Bosmans is another who inhabits this underworld, a professional Jester who, with the aid of his 'Meat-tenderizers', doubles as a reasonable goon. He grew up fast amidst the flagging tongues of *Little Farmacia* (often celebrated as the funniest place in the world), where he learned that improvisation was the key to comfortable survival. Chester is struggling to maintain his career among all these 'new dogs', and he seems to have fallen out of favour in the circles, hopefully not because someone found out what he

did to Blossom the pornstar. But he continues to stay in the know (this is the keystone of the business).

Meanwhile, in Azania, Sims is waiting to murder someone.

Azania is a tremendous tower wedged in the gorge of a massive flat mountain, and its crucifix windows are like arrowslits from ancient castles. The crag itself is like a wall the Gods have drawn out from the earth. Thousands of people live in this place, and the ruins of a broken city lurk below to be seen, and there are rumours of pagan 'beasts' living in the rubble. This necropolis resides in a natural depression of the land, flanked by the formidable amphitheatre of the mountain, and by the sea, and the resilient steel giraffes still bend to drink at the quay.

Azania's population all rely on the tower's tireless elevator, to be fed. This elevator, a 6x6m travelling market, takes 6 hours to cruise from top to bottom (at 27mm per second). It has only stopped once in the tower's history.

Florence is a resident of the Azania, who has the unique opportunity in her world, to travel through the tower. She comes across a body during her rounds and believes that foreigners, with their heretical gossip, have no place within the society.

The Azanians have lived for so long with their humble theism that no one can recall a past outside the tower.

No one, but for the convicts. Sims is one of these, an inmate from Dalphiney, now relegated to the 'secure floors' of the tower, which constitute an outsourced prison. Sims has become madly obsessed with watching the elevator appear twice a day. He is constantly counting in his head, and consequently knows exactly when the elevator will come. He believes that from the elevator shaft will rise the man he is to murder.

Ashelene is a real princess. This adventurous girl knows all the secret passageways out of the tower, and loves nothing more than to scramble about the mountain's cliffs under the moonlight. This nocturnal world is her playground. Ashelene is from two worlds. She knows the many secrets of Azania's strange mythology, which she contemplates in a coinslot gash in the grey old mesa by Goblin's mound. She has experienced the hard city life in Dalphiney.

When Chester happens upon Buddy Kelly, the Clown seems to show an inordinate interest in the young man. Maybe it is something he has seen in him? Something he has heard? Whatever the reason (perhaps it is the promise of a free trip to Queenie's harem), Chester nudges Buddy Kelly in the direction of Azania, to this place where he will confront the realities of another world, where he will be forced to confront himself.

During Buddy Kelly's journey, to rid his mind of its nagging unease, he encounters the 'terrible twosome' (the Behr twins, who couldn't be more dissimilar), he meets devout and proper Tina, Aunty Trisha, little Pin, the meths fiend Loaf, dreary Bill Brussel, the scarified arboreal men who maintain the mechanised trees, Florence with her trolley, and many others.

What really happened to his sister? What is the strange toy the Azanians produce? What is the secret of the UP broach? How did Azania come to be? Where is Winch?

Come to Azania

By Jeff Webster

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Part I

His Mighty Shadow

This was the first case he had cared about in years.

Granted, the case itself was unusually radical. The circumstances surrounding her death were unprecedented, truly sensational. The press had been all over it. Tums knew the *Guardian* article by heart.

“Snake Bite Kills Student Vet” was the headline.

These words, bold and black, had been strapped to every street pole across Dalphiney. These words were in the clipping pinned to Tums's living-room wall.

It was a cool autumn afternoon when the victim had returned to her old home. The air must have been still and dry, resting quietly about these modest swells of land, far away from oceans and mountains. It had been a calm afternoon like today, with the sky a flat grey, darkening as night encroached, scented with the promise of rain.

Tums was now exactly where she must have been. She must have stood in front of these high walls, with their flaking paint, with their rust-tipped spikes, these walls speckled with the vestigial sucker-feet of a prolific ivy. What was it she had been hoping to find on the other side?

“A female veterinary student was found dead after being bitten by a snake in Stilfontein Park yesterday, in the first recorded fatality caused by the Rinkhals. The 22 year old student, yet to be named, had overdosed on prescription medication before returning to her childhood home, Police believe. 'It may have been an allergy, or the drugs may have aggravated the effects of the venom,' a Police spokesperson has said ... ”

The story had exploded about a month ago. But, as was the way of these things, the media had gradually lost interest. For one, the family had declined an autopsy, denying resolution, quashing the intrigue. And her name had not yet been disclosed. This was because the next of kin couldn't be contacted; namely, her father.

Without a name, without a face to match to the victim, the tragedy was somehow rendered less tragic. There were too many Jane Doe toe-tags around here already, too many of which were suicides. And the Pigs had filed away the docket in their paper junkyard, which was fair enough. Another corpse was the last thing they needed, especially one self-made. And as for another open ended investigation; the planet was running out of rain forest.

Tums, however, knew her name. It was Claire Kelly. It had been Claire Kelly.

She had been a pretty girl. She had died on the day before her 23rd birthday.

She had an older brother named Buddy, whom Tums had met; an odd, morose character (but then, who'd blame him). She had a father named Winchester. No one had heard from this man in months. No one could find him – Tums would know.

She had a mother, Catherine, who must have been a pretty girl, too. Catherine certainly was a beautiful woman now, despite the tear stains down her cheeks.

Herein lay the difference. Herein lay the reason why Tums actually gave a shit about this case. It was not because of the snake and the squatters, and it was not because of the missing father. It was not on account of this being, by numerous degrees, his highest profile assignment to date. It was not because it was his first body. It was simply because of the mother, Catherine Kelly. Catherine Kelly was the reason Tums felt differently about this one.

Tums Kole caught cheaters. Cheaters were his bread-ticket. But now he was grappling with the novel problems associated with his new found motivation. He was endeavouring, for the first time in his career, to get into the head of the victim. Not that he believed in clairvoyance or any of that rubbish, but he needed to close this case, and, well, he had seen detectives role-playing on TV.

He had to get into the head of Claire Kelly. He had to solve this thing, so that he might get into the pants of her mother. And he was struggling. He suddenly found he cared, but empathy was not his thing. Interest was making him feel uneasy.

He pressed the doorbell by the pedestrian gate. It made a high-pitched purr like a dial-tone. Tums asked himself: How must it have felt, after seven years living somewhere else, to be hearing it from the outside?

“Hello?”

“Is that Mrs Blane?” Tums asked, tapping the little camera by the grilled speaker.

“Could be?”

“Could you open up, I've got--”

“Are you police?”

“No.”

The gate clicked brutally.

Tums pushed through into the entrance lane. The brick path was weeded, and flanked by miserable roses, which were severely pruned, marooned in the prickly grass. Had Claire once traversed this stretch on a skateboard? Had she been pushed to and from the gate, bundled up in a wheelbarrow? The space between these four walls, brushed by a scanner's beam of sun, what had it meant to sweet Claire Kelly?

He noticed the twigs strewn across the ground. Had she dreamt of snakes? Had she dreamt of paths like this, where, on second glance, the sticks were scaled and slithering, rising up, the rose stems themselves muscularly coiling, spreading their hoods?

Poppy Blane emerged from the front door. She was enormous. Tums was no sylph himself, but this woman was a monster. She made for quite a sight, in her dowdy black t-shirt and white takkies, waddling towards him enthusiastically.

“She must have taken an antiemetic beforehand,” she said, first thing, offering Tums her fleshy mitten. “You sure you're not police?”

“I'm Detective Kole. *Private Investigator.*”

“Poppy. Please, come in. So what do you think about my theory?”

“You could be right. That's what I'm here to find out,” Tums said, chuffed with how much he sounded like Morse.

“Come in,” she Poppy, flapping her wings.

Tums followed Poppy as she hobbled down the path. She seemed to have a lot of energy (which he thought would make sense, with all those nutrients).

She paused by the open front door, turning around. Chat-show applause leaked out of the house.

“Oh, she came down this path by the way,” Poppy said. A finger hooked over her bottom lip. “She was cradling her handbag. It was then that I noticed she was wearing a ring on her left hand. Definitely her left hand – the ring finger. She was wearing a lab coat and I said, these were my words exactly by the way, I said, 'Are you a doctor?' and she chuckled. She was demure. I thought she was a sweet girl. She said, 'Vet in training,' and I said 'We love animals --'”

“Thanks,” Tums said, sighing inwardly, “let's just go inside.”

This massive woman had clearly been through the motions. But her enthusiasm, her gaiety, struck Tums as somewhat perverse. As if she was glad the case was still open, that strangers still rocked up at her door whom she could usher inside, as if she was glad for some company remote from the necessary transactions of a life, remote from the judgemental looks of shop-cashiers and baggers and beggars. As if she was glad the girl had come here to die.

It really was hard work giving a shit. But then, he thought of Catherine. She was the same height as Tums, which wasn't ideal (Tums was short but preferred shorter women), but her eyes were so dark, so deep. He wanted to get lost in those eyes.

Inside the lounge, a disintegrating carpet was mostly concealed by a bubblegum-pink woolly rug. There were cracks tapering down the walls, and there was a light fixture, like

an upside-down highball glass, filled with a black confetti; the husks of dead beetles baited by the light. The faded, floral couch-set matched the settled, aggregate smell of Poppy Blane's lifestyle. The air was dully candied. Tums smelt babies. He smelt cats.

“What can I help you with detective?” Poppy asked, flumping into a couch – the seat pre-moulded to fit her magnitude.

A coffee would be nice, thought Tums.

“Can you take me to where she died?” he asked.

“Of course. You want to know what we talked about?”

“Maybe later.”

A parrot's voice came from the kitchen, perfectly imitating a bottle being opened, the liquid pouring into a glass. A skinny white cat hopped onto the striped tea-towel arranged by Poppy's arm, commencing an elaborate stretch.

“I asked if she was a cat person or a dog person,” Poppy said, snatching the raised arch of the animal from the air. “She said cats. I said, 'This place is practically a menagerie!’”

Poppy scratched between the feline's ear, continued, “I find dogs are so needy, don't you? I said that too.”

“What did she say?” asked Tums dryly.

“She said, 'People are so needy'. Then she asked if I painted those.”

Poppy pointed to some amateur still-lives mounted on the wall.

The room was a bit of a shambles. There were unleavened heaps of magazines around a rudimentary scratching post, and scattered across the floor and side-tables were newspaper tatters and an assortment of rudely carved statues and cat toys and baby rattles which Tums couldn't quite tell apart.

“Mrs Blane,” Tums said, “please take me to the river.”

“I'd hardly call it a river,” she said. “More like a swamp. I wish they would do something about it. I wouldn't wash my car in that water. She said she wanted to study the Egyptian geese down there. Something about their migratory patterns.”

Tums said nothing.

“I said she should look into culling those damned mynahs.”

“Isn't that a thing?” he said, not bothering to veil his irreverence. “Shall we go?”

The papers had been right about one thing. Claire had overdosed. Catherine had found the empty pill bottle on the girl's bedside table. A whole bottle, drunk down like carbonated water. Tums was wondering if she would have been feeling tired by now, from the pills, from the weight of reimmersion, or else, from the pulpy sky, the evening's liquid light. Poppy Blane was tiresome enough.

Poppy stood up ungracefully. The parrot made its pop and gurgle. They left the house through the back door in the kitchen – there, the litter box rested distastefully by the sill. They walked down the stairs and into the garden, Poppy ploddingly in the lead, silent but for her breathing.

Claire had wanted to get to the river. Had she thought of it as something unowned, something untagged, a wild place that she and her brother might politely inconvenience with their shouts and laughter?

The garden was large and wild. The lawn, tending to yellow as the air grew frosty, was hemmed in on all sides by a hungry brush and followed an 'L' shape around the house. Each of the east-facing bedrooms connected with this modest piece of nature, each with a view of the thick-rooted mulberry. Tums wondered if the Kellys had sat under its shade for lazy Sunday lunches. He wondered if they had waged war here, with these berries for armament, if they had washed afterwards in the sprinkler's cascade. He noticed, where the tree's main trunk splayed, the remnant floorboards of a tree-house.

Tums followed Poppy through the garden. He was trying to keep his mind on track.

He noticed rocky beds overflowing with thickets of little yellow and blue flowers. He noticed the grasping leaves of shade plants, burst from the soil like sea-monster tentacles, covetous amidst the large ivied rocks. He saw a tap towering out from a swath of white blooms, each of which was like a compound eye, dense with tiny, four-petalled flowers, their delicate stamens poking from the centres. There was a gnarled lemon tree and, against the east wall, was a row of trees with boomslang-green bark, with a silver ladder lying prostrate behind.

Tums passed Poppy at some point. If she had been talking he hadn't noticed. He passed a cosy pool entrenched beside a crimson bottlebrush and a cycad (the pool-net propped in the latter's fronds). The water was yet blue and hopefully sparkling. He passed a lone Bird of Paradise, which was majestically tall among the weeds and common brush, and an unseen aeroplane dragged a deep tremble across the brooding twilight. The sun was also hidden and surely not far from the horizon now.

There was a small vegetable garden beside a compost heap, with three rows of unshowing mealie stalks, some dying marigolds, some parsley bushels and droopy carrot tails. An elderly man in blue overalls was on his haunches, tilling the soil, and he looked up and waved distractedly with his trowel. Three of Poppy's dreaded mynahs were hopping vaingloriously around the patch's perimeter.

Tums had made his way to the palisade fence at the fringe of the park, with Poppy eventually joining him.

“This one,” she said, singling out the key.

She unfastened a hefty padlock and a length of chain fell onto the unshorn grass.

“I won't go out there. Not after what happened. Being a woman. I'm sure you understand,” she said and shivered abruptly from around her shoulders. The vibrations were quickly mitigated around her bosom.

“What puzzles me,” she said, “is why she went down the bank? I told her the geese were up by the dam.”

“Where did it happen?” Tums asked.

Poppy pointed through the fence.

“You'll see the police tape is still there.”

“Thanks,” said Tums, “I won't be long.”

“That's exactly what she said.”

Tums forced the gate open, breaking the roots ensnaring its base. He shouldered through the gap.

It was chilly, and he pocketed his hands. A swallow or bat swooped past her ear.

Had she hugged herself in her vet's coat? Like some straitjacketed patient marching through a dream? Pressing through a memory? As if she were tailing a faerie?

Tums trod over the straw grass. He wondered if the sun could enliven this neglected park, if it could expose rich gold and copper strands in the foliage, the hues in the few feral flowers.

He crossed a rutted path, noticing the power-lines overhead. There were dozens of cables, like the staves on a freehand score, stark against the blotchy clouds. Three-tiered pylons, timidly clasping the electric lines, lined both sides of the river. These cables came from a vast stretch away, from where the coal plants assiduously exhaled far beyond Dalphiney's tremendous reach, and they followed the river, stepping over the bridges, circumventing flood points, to the sub-stations nestled within the suburbs of Arbor North. The Stilfontein recreational park, this strip of veld, was merely a conduit.

Beyond a slight rise, Tums stopped at the lip of the south embankment. The bank was almost sheer, held together by the brambly vegetation clawing out of a few stone gabions. On the other side of the water was a sandy point-bar, littered with driftwood and plastic bags and rust-caked cans, and the bank itself was merely erosion. The water was stagnant, boggy, clogged with wreathes of black plastic and polystyrene, and a mucous algae clung to the debris.

A few tentative rains drops broke softly on the grass, plopped into the fetid stream, and the cool air fluttered weakly, bringing to Tums's nostrils the smell of fire.

He trembled, not for the cold, but for the intrusion of his surroundings. He looked up river and saw, coming from staggered points all along its banks, fifteen, no, twenty plumes of dense grey smoke, as if from chimneys. The smoke rose, cleaved by the power-lines, and lingeringly dissipated into the grey bulk of the low clouds. He looked to the east and saw more chugging, vagabond stoves. Hundreds.

Next to a mournful willow, overlooking the donga, was a concrete bench, and there, spray-painted in white on its back, was written: *Africa back to God. The Lord and his Son coming soon. Soon!*

Could this place have once been tranquil? What had she been thinking to come back here? The city had not changed in seven years, not much. The rules had not changed. She must have been looking for trouble, one way or another.

The yellow police tape was wrapped around a bounder, just to his right. A beacon. Her tombstone.

Tums climbed down the bank, feeling the mud squelch around his shoes, and as he looked back to the house through the viscous dusk, he thought he saw the flat shape of Poppy on the balcony, like a grey cinnamon bun topped with a Maraschino cherry.

Here was where she had died. Here, in this nest of dead leaves, was the clue.

What had she seen? A dead black snake lying on its back, two white bands around its throat, its tongue jabbing out of its open mouth? Like an abused pipe-cleaner? Or did she have to search for it? Her fists had been locked in cadaveric spasm around handfuls of mud. There had been mud under her fingernails.

Hemachatus haemachatus, the Rinkhals, was not meant to kill humans. Tums had done his research. This keeled-scale spitting cobra had venom that was neurotoxic, evolved to kill, but not people. Small dogs certainly. And here was the clue.

Catherine had related how their fox-terrier, Dangerfield, Claire's most cherished friend in the world, had been bitten by this snake, bitten on the throat and again on the nose, here in the muck. They had been throwing a ball for the dog, and Dangerfield had trotted after it. But he had started barking, a signal that the animal had lost the ball. Claire had clambered down. The dog had been sniffing the snake.

They had rushed him to the vet but he couldn't be saved.

Tums bent over, looking around gingerly. He saw two men, crouching also, watching him from the other side of the feeble steam. And a few metres to his left, a man and a woman were sitting under a tarpaulin on a broad rock. These vagrants barely acknowledged him. They had seen it all before.

What were you doing Claire? Tums thought.

What was she doing here in the rain and the dark? With her bag and her ring down here in Dalphiney's gutter? She had drunk down the pills, just short on a lethal dose. And if Poppy was right, she had taken an antiemetic ... And she had come to her old home, to this strip of veld, because she knew the snake had once lived here. She had scratched around in the filth. The squatters had been watching. They had come closer. It had been do or die. Was it that simple?

Tums Kole smiled. Giving a shit was more rewarding than he had imagined.

Dalphiney's natural light was fading. The eager imitators were flashing on in rows, exposing the tamed air in every corner, unshrouding a city's clutter. The evening's garlic wormed through half-open windows, through burglar-bars. As doors opened, others slammed. For many, it was already after-hours.

For the man now standing outside the Kellys' front door however, another shift was just beginning.

This was Earls – just call him Earls.

Earls was in the business of pugilism and for him, the terminating day promised neither more nor less than any other ever had. For Earls, it was business as usual. He had another long session to look forward to. This would involve: collection, repossession, quite probably remonstrations.

Earls stood now in the unadorned corridor outside the residence of his next order of business, three storeys above clamorous Jacaranda street. He was hunching slightly, as matched his build, and his feet were restless and twinging in his specialist, steel-toed boots, firmly gripped in the grime of the grey linoleum.

It was to be business as usual, but this did not bother him, for Earls found his trade particularly engrossing. You see, Earls had a God in his head who was very forgiving.

In fact, this God was supernaturally supportive of the decisions one such as Earls was forced to make, in the line of duty. Likewise, his God looked favourably upon the man's self-fostered regime of justice, its particulars, as well as the methods of its dispensation. And yet, this God had snubbed his ward with hands that were too small.

Earls was staring at the small, unconvincingly italicised characters pasted on the wooden door, just above the peephole (*No. 16* they read). He did not look at the peephole, not directly. But he could not help imagining how, to the capricious denizen of that dead eye, his arms must have appeared mockingly disproportionate, how they must have been poking from his spinning-top figure like legs of lamb.

He came now to imagine the sad seriousness in his spoon-skewed face.

And there, in the sterile light, he quietly dared any fool to point it out – any one of these minor, aesthetic shortcomings. He mumbled the threat to himself, to any ancestral wraith who might be tuned-in. Some had learned the hard way that such jest was not a wise idea, nor, for that matter, to underestimate his reach. And in such cases of violence,

as in all others, he had impunity from judgement. After all, his God was not unfair, nor adverse to the merited spilling of blood.

Earls then blinked asynchronously (left, right), emulating a twitch to which he reckoned himself entitled. This was a small act of recognition was becoming habitual. It was a recalibration to the will of his vengeful supervisor, which doubled as a private show for the evanescent soul inside the grubby peep-hole.

Twitch complete, he waited. He felt the pressure dam behind his eyes. He was now on a familiar path to frenzy.

A small step behind Earls, Simon Keanes waited.

Keanes was pivoting forward from the waist, as if engaged in reading over the shorter man's shoulder. His hands, held behind his back, were wrapped around the stalks of a bunch of flowers. This bouquet, which he now held upside-down, had been intercepted on the stairs. The delivery boy had apparently been happy to give it up to the curious pair, to spare his legs the walk at the late hour. The flowers gave Keanes, along with the overcoat and his shiny ponytail, the appearance of an undertaker.

Simon Keanes, as always, was unaffected by his partner's offbeat behaviour. It is improbable that the former had noticed the tic, the darkening of Earls's complexion, the murmuring, or anything untoward at all, being as he was: not easily moved. Across his long, crag-boned face, that unwitting leer was still securely settled, which had persisted through all the blood-addled disorientation of the trade, through all the screams.

Feeling the moment was right, Earls let fly. He pounded the door with his veteran prizefighter. His stumpy arm was as sturdy as a firebell knocker. He thought: how accommodating the collisions, compared with bone.

Five thunderous knocks. His signature complete.

The thuds tingled through his sinuses, perfectly spaced to mark the seconds, and although he could appreciate the canon the echoes made, catching up to one another and ricocheting around the charmless halls of *Hoopoe Heights*, he did not smile just then. But he said to himself with sugary fervour: *just make me show you more. Just make me.*

He waited, unfurling his fist for the sake of first impressions.

On the other side of the door, having heard the first knocks of the joyless progression, Buddy Kelly had continued pouring his mother her after-dinner coffee. But by the fifth bang he had stopped, and her cup was half empty. The aromatic steam rose past his head, which was tilted close to hers, and he looked at her searchingly, holding the pot cocked.

Dearest Buddy Kelly, with his slender, curved neck you wouldn't think qualified for the weight of his skull, with his slender wrists and fingers, was again looking to his mother for

what to do. He probed her pinched face for what was no longer there. For the first time he realised that it was her strength that had defined her. That it was this strength that had teased away the hardness of life from his sight for all these years of growth and learning. And it was no longer there.

In its place he saw the marker of a new look, of an expression that would appear to him sporadically during the long and trying nights on his journey through Azania. There, exposed in her widened eyes, was a gentle quiver.

All this, consequence of a knock. She was startled and afraid; a green prisoner wrenched from a dream of heaven.

Buddy Kelly knew he must tend to the disturbance. She would not ask him to.

3. Take Your Pick

It wasn't the first time that Catherine Kelly, the mother, had been warned by calloused hands rapping a message on the barrier between her closely-kept life and the mad chorus from the others on the outside. Nor was it the first time that the message was so clearly a warning of invasion.

Earls's five rude shots went off without a jot of second thought. Hearing them she foresaw, in an instant, the extent of the change that would befall her. For an instant, she surfaced behind the eyes of an old woman with a strange and tangled history, who somehow bore her name.

Although never a believer in things outside the scope of reason, it was not the first time that a knock had occasioned presage of drastic change to Catherine Kelly's life.

She had retold the story of that catalytic day on many an occasion. There was a time when they had recalled it together. As newly-weds they had interrupted each other excitedly, or she had proffered it whole as he looked on smirking, sipping his undiluted whiskey. Over and over it had proved the perfect dinner-party anecdote. The story of the day they had met.

Yet as their marriage wore on, the tale became more and more secreted, until she came to hold it closely, to cradle it like an unexplained child she hoped inconspicuous at her breast. In these latter years, it was only relinquished when prompted by social propriety, by the cordial insistence of guests.

But by then it was like hearsay she had come to doubt. The story was lost of all its colour and worth, and she came to resent the magical intimacy remembrance of the events once evoked.

Buddy Kelly too knew it by heart.

That day. Five knocks. Some 25 years ago.

She had glanced at the door, a different, flimsier door, as if trying to guess the mystery prize she might elect to reveal. She had hesitated, for a moment scrunching up the hem of her royal-blue cotton dress in her hands at her smooth girlish hips. Although not prone to believe the world capable of machinations beyond coincidence, she had heard it was him, from the knock – one loud then four quick like a sandpiper's step. She had known he was coming to alter her life.

Just before she had helped the door swing inward, it had happened inexplicably, much like now: a moment had flashed across her sight, and it had suddenly been clear to her that her whole conscientious life had been spent waiting, and she had then been ready.

Ready to be swept off her feet. So the happier version went.

Then it had been Winch at the door. Then, her husband-to-be. Blocking the doorway. Blocking escape. And how strongly defined he had appeared before her.

She told of his clean, angular chin, of the smile to match the lines of the equilateral triangle atop his silly cartooned tie. His form was so focused she often forgot the hazy bank of rain breaking on the busy street behind, that there were others there, purposeful in their evening commute, in the driven bustle, that there was possibility harboured in its kicked-up rumours. He was so monstrous in size. She would tell of his dark skin, kindred to the sun. She would tell of his handsome Gatsby hat.

He came offering his eccentric wares (here a flutter of the hand in the early days; a cheeky roll of the eyes he did not mind). Those miraculous oddities borne of technological discovery – which a homeowner might never think necessary but could ill afford to be without. He came with his retractable portmanteau, brimful pilot versions of unprecedented gadgets and appliances, with colour catalogues of a thousand others – one of which, he thoroughly believed, would make him rich.

A pen that could write upside down to keep by the phone (or just in case, she joked, you might need scribble an urgent love letter on the inside of a shuttle hurtling through space). An ice-tray filled with perfect squares of stalwart grass, flaunting the archetypal greens, from lime to that of moss gorged on the pillars of a waterfall; take your pick. A pan you would never need to scrub.

And he came with himself to sell, packaged neatly in a dark, thickly pin-striped suit, slightly worn but still bright, with his brown eyes blazing under the squat peak of his poufy grey cap, with that brutish aftershave to remind you of his calibre of man.

Now, it was Earls and his acromegalic compatriot on their errand. Now, her life was the frightening tableau she had glimpsed at then, that first time, before she had opened the door.

Nevertheless, back then she was happy to let in the change – one loud, four quickly playful – and happy to fall in love with the man. He appeared so blindingly charismatic and confident, smelling of musk and sawdust and promise as he did then, a quarter century ago. He was so presentable, so inexorably solid.

But now he was gone and this new prophetic knock, she understood, could only mean devastation. Her son was all she had left.

Winchester Kelly had come from a different world.

She would often wonder if it was his history which emboldened his stride so. If it was in that faraway place that doubt had been cornered, straight after its inception, amidst the bounteous agar of prepubescent epiphany, amidst the hormones, glorious and wretched, where normally it builds into an unstoppable voice which reminds you when you look to overstep your bounds that the world is too big, that life is too short. She wondered if it was in that place, away and alien where he grew up, that doubt was unceremoniously snuffed.

Winchester Kelly came from a dry and dusty farm, from a world of yellow and brown. There, the lack of regular rainfall forced diversification in the means of his family's livelihood. And he was not a farmhand as his stature and girder-strong hands might have suggested (although he knew what it meant to toil, shirtless under the sun). He had been an heir.

Their main produce was from sheep: wool and mutton. And they had a few cows which they milked and eventually slaughtered for their hides and beef.

There were also chickens, some reluctant crows, a few goats, and fields of prickly pears, and the span of the land was everywhere scattered with tribes of tiny cacti.

Horses were housed in a dilapidated, windowless shed, and Catherine Kelly came to learn vicariously of the damp smell of manure and hay, of the way in which the beasts' massive snouts would coalesce out of the gloom, of their large shiny eyes, of the spiders and snakes that resided there, the decaying saddles hung on the walls.

Winchester Kelly had a crude, ridged nose like an unrefined sculpture. His jaw was broad, its magnitude truly Herculean – and Buddy Kelly came to quip (jealously perhaps, when his turned out sharp and feminine) that this mandible would be the perfect implement, should the situation arise, with which to bludgeon a whale.

Winch was thickset and heavy; he had not a spare sliver of fat.

Winchester Kelly was so christened in a small, clay-brick church in a time far-flung, because his father was fond of guns. And the leap to the moniker he preferred occurred because of the initiative of school-children, because he was reliably brazen.

When he was young, scarcely would a break-time elapse without the spectacle of mighty Winch hoisting one of his peers off the ground, flicking them into the air with whichever prodigious arm happened to be elected by the ride-goer and seconded by the circling gaggle of fans.

The apt correlation between the device and the young man had all to do with essence, all to do with the expansion of his shoulders, the lengthening of his frame. It was as if he

had visited a hall of mirrors and been permanently transfigured by the body-builder one. It was in his DNA, this gross inflation.

To the dismay of the boarding-school treasurer of those five years, he ate for four – initially, on single portions, he showed symptoms of anaemia. He ate mounds of cottage-pie barricaded by sizeable stacks of bread. He devoured deep reservoirs of porridge and custard, and then bartered with his classmates for more. All this led the name to stick and remain. Consequentially it was used by the chaplain, his parents, friends and teachers alike.

Winch grew up in a world that his son could never inhabit, not even in his imagination.

Buddy Kelly was told he was born five week prematurely, that he was as pale as a naked puppy, diminutive, a frog just grown its limbs, kicking feebly, drowning in amniotic pink.

Winch waited as this child grew, as he waded through tricky childhood in Dalphiney. Buddy Kelly approached the trigger point in years, fifteen, but he did not shoot up. They waited, monitored his progress with black-marker lines on the back of his bedroom door, and he inched upwards, eighteen years, twenty.

Buddy Kelly remained slinky and gaunt, of average height, his mother's son, and Winch never quite felt settled with the force of his own playful nudges. His loving tackles were gentle, but sometimes too much for the small-statured boy. Winch loved the boy nonetheless – he could appreciate that his son might have other talents – and he endeavoured to soften himself. Success in the cabinet city was not, after all, limited in avenues for adaptation. But Buddy Kelly would not have made it in Winch's world; there were times you could almost see (was it disappointment shaping Winch's face?) that this was what his father was thinking.

Winch came from a place of open spaces. Where the star choked nights stretched for leagues, an infinite roof to the tentative barks of agitated dogs steered across the plains, through the dry riverbeds, without ever striking a thing.

The farmhouse was surrounded by bleached gravel. And there was the hardy blue gum amongst the grey grass of the garden, with the screechy swing affixed with wire to the tree's moaning boughs, and there were the indigestible shrubs everywhere in between.

The main house, roofed in sheets of corrugated-iron, had four expansive stoeps, and many wire-screen doors to keep out the prodigious bugs of the semi-desert. It had a creaky wooden hallway, and water jugs were carefully placed on doilies in every room, a tumbler glass turned upside-down on top of each.

It was an unimaginable world to Catherine too, fraught with the persistent perils of drought, disease and wily predators. A world of guns and marmalade and steel-framed,

gearless bicycles; of servants who gathered the fresh, yellow-yoked eggs; of beef stew and pitchers filled with sour milk, ready to be stirred and slowly savoured. Of deadly snakes-bites and wildcats, of locust plagues. This was from where he had come.

Winch was the first and only of six children to abandon the farming life in pursuit of riches in the city; something that was forever begrudged by the incestuous community, something that, in the early days, evoked admiration from his wife. And shortly after he left (as if he had seen it augured in the sky), the humble plot where he was born was swallowed up on all sides by the burgeoning metropolis. Its way of life, its meagre yield, bought out for an embarrassing price.

“A different generation,” Winch would say when in an articulate mood. “You couldn't imagine the patience of the sun every day, the barrenness.”

She had admired him for it in the early days – all the peculiar parts that made him. And what a thing to be unafraid. He had been exactly the type of partner she had envisaged. He had been strong to protect her, to defend her from those who took without asking. Strong to take from her without understanding, to love her undistractedly, allow her to be the lesser, to be submissive at times, without a thought as to why she might have needed to be the victim, under him pinned and helpless and unspokenly grateful.

She could not have had a husband who shot her sceptical glances when she faltered in confidence. She could not have had a husband who caught her out for her pretence, real or imagined. Indeed, Winch had been oblivious to the voice in his head – at least, so she had thought of him. He had deflected that bombardment that never yields, never softens, hailing down on one such as she, caught awakened in a lonely metaverse of introspection.

On the shelf in which a large, flat television was the centrepiece – now darkly, eerily reflective of the frightened room – was a wooden-framed photograph. The picture was black and white and grainy, and depicted 13-year-old Winch standing ostentatiously in front of his austere farmer parents.

Although proud, Buddy Kelly's grandparents smiled reservedly, distrusting of the camera, each with tentative hand draped over the relentlessly expanding shoulders of their youngest progeny. On the left was the mother who doted from a distance, a cook and manager, always proper and well briefed in community scandal. On the right, the father, with his conical bald head, stern eyes, leathery face, who Catherine Kelly and her two children came to imagine industriously animated in tweed jacket and leather hat, with his indispensable bone handled knife – which he had made and was always at hand – calling the chickens around him before the sun had properly risen.

In front of this man, who could wrap the end of his bullwhip around his loyal wife's ankle from six full metres away without leaving a mark (so the story goes), the enigmatic product of both, Catherine's absconded husband, his young eyes devoid of doubt.

But then, the evasive rewards of his lifelong dream, his unrequited desire for money, became like the earth on his shoulders. And his warrior gait started to gradually shrink away, and the diagonal bars of his expansive back began to creep forward like a stuck jersey around his head. Whereas before he was preternaturally nimble, with each successive failed deal his footfalls got heavier. The effect was a latent meanness encroaching in red lines around his moistened eyes.

Buddy Kelly made for the door. She would not have asked him to.

They both sensed the flickering of an energy in the apartment, an unnameable feeling, that had wrapped up in it something like her dignity.

As Buddy Kelly approached the door she looked to the photograph. She missed Winch sincerely. She wondered where on earth he could be.

4. The Surprising Truth

Buddy Kelly had an expression in his facial repertoire that most unfamiliar people reflexively found amusing. This mannerism was more often than not, like the common reaction to it (a patronising smile or even a blurt of laughter), unsuppressible.

His clammy eyes would open wider than usual, giving him the appearance of hypervigilance, like one sober and alone amongst the scuttling Dalphiney night. Above these skittish eyes, his thick eyebrows minutely rose at their centres, and substantially at the tip of the left one, pushing three wavy furrows, each the width of a hair, up upon his forehead. His turgid lips would down-turn minutely. His nostrils would minutely flare.

Buddy Kelly never fully understood the reaction. He often concluded that he might just be funny-looking. He never suspected the easy explanation: that despite the obvious imperceptibility of these slight adjustments, together they combined to present a singular impression long perceived by sentient man, and thus memorably bundled into the nerves of the human brain. That overwhelming impression: surprise. Dumb surprise.

Of course, Buddy Kelly's boyish face did not assume this composition upon command – although arguably predisposed to bewilderment owing to his soft features. It was rather, in accordance with his nature, that he presented himself *prepared* to be surprised, as one should, he reasoned, when meeting someone new. Should one be armed with an urgent superiority to impart, when unacquainted eyes lock in the street? When entering an elevator? Should one customarily assert a supervening take on clothing, on vocation or gender, when neither party has yet any premise by which to judge the other? As when one opens the door to one unknown?

Earls's intuition, like his violence, was accomplished. He sensed Simon Keane's oblong head immobile by his cheek. He sensed scurrying within the flat, coming nearer, and this made him glad, because Earls, like his God, had little patience for indecision. He was thus hard-pressed to announce himself twice. Then he heard the click of the single key-lock. No chain.

Too easy.

Earls was now confronted with the discomfiting vision of a young man blocking the doorway, coffee-pot in tow. This apprehensive youth had a weak jaw and laminated eyes, which seemed to be almost pleading. He had a stubble mockery of a moustache like an

extra frown above his feminine lips, and looked, altogether, surprised and utterly vulnerable.

Earls's honed glare softened as he laughed heedlessly, sincerely, and he almost forgot to make his introduction. He almost forgot how much he detested weakness. What a pitiful assertion of self the figure made. Earls then noticed the woman.

“Darlings,” he said through a grin.

“Can I help you?” said the child.

Earls pushed into the apartment, his boots squeaking off the parquet floor, Simon Keanes in his slip-stream. The shorter of the insurgents instinctively went to the spot in the room that was not most central, but that afforded the greatest visibility, the optimal command. This was just outside the circle of furniture and in front of the TV, where one giving a speech would stand for maximum effect. He crossed his powerful arms.

“You can help me,” Earls said lazily, “and you might be able to help yourselves.”

Simon Keanes went over to the couch where Catherine Kelly sat. His ungainly vulture-hop took him across the room deceptively quickly. He whipped out the flowers magician-like, slinging out a drop that splashed on the side of the woman's nose.

“These must be for you,” he said. His accent was a distinctive mash - like that of someone deaf or too-well travelled at an early age.

It is hard to know the enigmatic pulls of pleasure sewn through his oddness, his role-playing, but Simon Keanes seemed delighted by this performance.

Catherine Kelly wiped the water from her nose, took the flowers. She read the card unhurried. She placed them on her glass-top table, of *her* spacious living room. This room was bordered on two sides by the ivory Taffeta curtains she had ordered and that Winch had installed, with the chunky abstract paintings by the bookshelf, which were mauve and grey with ribbons of brilliant orange, which linked together the earthy tones of the couches, seatee, ottoman, the light-washed shelf, the eggshell walls, the austere chandelier, to create warmth and a feeling of plain elegance throughout the room, throughout *her* home. She stood up defiantly, pushing on her thighs.

Catherine Kelly, being a high-school teacher, was not unfamiliar with the insolence achievable by young adults. But then, she had also encountered the types immune to the authority of the system, to the invisible committees. These types were immediate candidates for expulsion and hence, became the school-hoppers, the reprobates, who would never submit. She saw it now in Earls; that voracious rebellion.

Buddy set the coffee down. He navigated the room and the intruders in a manner paradoxical to that first sighting by which Earls had appraised him and tersely written him off.

Buddy Kelly did not like what was happening. He did not like how his mother had succumbed to fear, and his dark eyebrows dropped and his eyes hardened and as he stepped around Earls, he regarded him ruthlessly from this new hard mask.

Earls noticed this strength. He was slightly taken aback, but yes, he liked it, too. That's better, he thought, let's see the puppy bark.

"It's a funny fact about humans," Earls began, picking up a clear glass pawn from the chess set beside the photo frames on the shelf, "that we spend so much of our time bending the truth. Telling little white lies. And the other kind. You darlings look more the white lie sort. But it doesn't make a difference how you lie, if you fib about fucking the neighbour or if you're like me and have to make up stories about why you're covered in blood that isn't your own. The black lies. They're all the same. What're your names by the way?" Earls fondled the pawn, formed a fist around it.

Buddy Kelly looked at his mother. She was staring at Earls, apparently too focused on remaining together to speak.

Earls gave a melodramatic sigh. He replaced the piece precisely.

"I'm not police, you know. You don't have the right to remain silent."

"I'm Buddy. This is my mother."

"He squeaks!" Earls said, picking up the black queen. He tossed it up and caught it leisurely. "Well, Buddy, very pleased to meet you. Does your mother have a name?"

"Kelly," she said before her son could respond, clearly battling to suppress the quaver. "Catherine Kelly. Is that the right answer?"

Simon Keanes had partially straightened, his hands returning behind his back. He stood perennially hunched, like one examining the intricacy of brush strokes at a gallery. He was uncomfortably close to the residents and merely watched them, blinking disconcertingly seldom. His long face was like that of an automaton, and his listless scrutiny of each did not correlate in any way with who was actually speaking. He stared each square in the eye, brandishing his frightening countenance, his exaggerated bones, with his distended eyes in the visor thrown down by the heavy shelf of his brow.

Earls's face dragged into a terrible grin. He seemed to invest effort in the full utilisation of its elasticity, seemed to relish in the torsion of his nefarious complexion, so that now it was all cut up by unexpected wrinkles. Earls was not an attractive man - his loopy hair was receding ungracefully, his eyes were too far apart. He knew this. Earls had studied himself

in mirrors, scrutinised the bulges of his squashed, broken nose, and was all the more vain for his ugliness. It permitted certain transgressions; him and Keanes. Fair is fair.

“A lie is a lie,” he said. “And the funny thing is, people *do* know the difference. No matter how good at it you are, how well practised. Actors are the worst. You aren't actors are you? I imagine not. But still, because you know the difference, you show it when you lie. You show us. See, I believe you are Kellys. But I'm no expert. I'm no expert in the things you give away. The things you say when you look around,” he looked left, then casually right in demonstration. “When you hesitate or frown. The micro-expressions they call them Keanes?”

Simon Keanes nodded. He had thick sideburns and if his neck didn't hook downward so (with his long face bobbing on the end), he would have been fantastically tall.

Earls nodded, echoing his partner.

“Micro-expressions,” he said. “But that's why I brought my friend along. Because he is. An expert. The best in the business. Am I lying Keanes?”

“No,” said Simon Keanes.

“There, you see? Keanes has other talents also,” Earls said. “God only knows what this poor man has been through. God knows what he's put the rest of us through. He's sort of switched off to people, unlike me. I can still shed a tear now and then, when I come to admire the beauty of this world, the terrible beauty. Not very often I might add, and not at the things you might expect either. But still, heartless Keanes here – that's what they call him – has found his place in this big barn-dance. By my side. Calling out the guilty. It's all too much fun, isn't it Keanes? What they call you?”

“It's all too much fun Earls. Sociopath they call me, amongst other things,” Keanes said, smiling blandly, showing little gaping teeth.

It had become dark outside and the glass chandelier emitted its soft, sparkly light. That, certainly, the room had accommodated its fair share of verbal altercations and foul moods did not taint the intimacy, the normal familial atmosphere that the remaining Kellys experienced here, lounged on the couches in quiet discussion under the warm light. It was now violated.

“We're not guilty of anything,” Buddy Kelly said.

“No, no, I'm sure you aren't,” said Earls. “Keanes?”

Simon Keanes, for a moment, did not move. An urgent siren grew, sped past without pause, faded slowly to nothing. He then shook his head.

“That's curious. When you half believe you're being honest. And you are. But you're not telling the truth. Are you?”

Buddy Kelly looked down, betrayed by his eyes.

“There is no one that is not guilty,” Earls said very slowly. “You’re supposed to believe you’re innocent. Because you think there’s no one listening when your mind speaks. No one watching when you dream. But if there was, how would they frame you? What would they see when you dream your innocent dreams? How would they tell of it? In a way more clearly than you allow yourself to see? What have you done Buddy Kelly? Does it not count because nobody knows? Because you’ve told no one? There is no one that is not guilty. No one. It’s how you deal with it that makes you a man.”

He replaced the queen delicately, his gaze following his hands. His eyes snapped back to Buddy Kelly.

“What bad things have you done Buddy Kelly? And you’re all grown up. I have someone who listens, you see. He knows I am wicked to the core just the way he made me. But that’s not important for now, who would like to go first?”

“Talk to me and then get out of my house,” said Catherine Kelly.

Earls saw her anger. He felt anger bite him also. He grinned his sly grin.

“Okay Mrs. Kelly, that suits me fine. It is Mrs?”

“Yes,” she said.

Earls looked to his stooping associate. He watched as Simon Keanes nodded briskly, decidedly.

“Your husband goes by the name Winch?”

She did not answer. He was gone and still these ugly characters from his extra-marital life followed his trail, carrying into her home their odour of sweat and felonious metal, to expose the extent of her family’s fragmentation in stark light. To haunt them. It was about Winch, this invasion. Had they seen the photographs?

She looked there now and Simon Keanes shot his gaze around his shoulder in the direction where her eyes had broached, for a microsecond, the photographs on the shelf, and it was too late. Earls turned unconcernedly, as if to a moth brushing past his vision, and he picked up the silver frame that housed a snapshot taken at the wedding.

Earls held the photo with both hands. He looked up from under his brow.

“*Where is he?*” he hissed.

Catherine Kelly could not imagine what memories of twisted dealings the sight of her husband may have evoked, but Earls was filling with the toxins that made him an addict to his work: the rich adrenalin, the pressure of his blood, the arousal that smothered observability so that his God’s whispering would be stoppered for a spell, so that

afterwards he would watch what he had done as if it were a film of which he had played no part in the making.

“I don't know,” she uttered, almost a whisper.

Earls rushed over to where she stood by her son.

“Keanes?” he snapped.

Simon Keanes nodded, but Earls no longer seemed interested.

“Tell me now,” Earls jabbed at the picture, “*where is he?*”

Catherine Kelly tilted her head. She looked at the photograph.

See how she had radiated, how she had glowed hung on his mighty arm? So plainly happy in her cloche-style veil, in the gown with its overlay of soft chiffon. It was so smooth nothing had ever felt like it. She remembered the feeling of possibility when she felt a new smoothness, a new elegance. She remembered how alive she was, looking now at the low neckline and the beaded flowers under the bust. She remembered the promise. She was only as tall as his shoulder, and had a stilettoed foot kicked back, sprung back with delight, smiling in ghost white.

Was Winch's smile laced with conceit? Would Keanes have known? She took the thing Earls held like a tablet. She peered straight into his eyes and let it fall from her grasp. They all heard the glass smash on the floor.

“He has gone. I don't know where,” she said.

“*Keanes?!*” shouted Earls.

Simon Keanes did not move.

Buddy Kelly too, had been infected by a zestful anger. It felt strangely depersonalising, like a plate of bone had clicked out of place in his skull, as if sense and consideration had suddenly blackened.

Earls had by this time, closed his hand, made a fist of brick, and his mouth was cast in an ugly snarl, with bits of spittle gusting off his lip. He raised his arm up to under his nose, as if summoning power, and Buddy Kelly dashed backwards out of the room to fulfil the plan he had been forming before his mind had been addled by hatred.

In an instant he was back, holding a chair leg, rectangular but for the long, light shard which was the stake's crystalline bone, a blade made from where the leg had splintered from its article. Buddy held it by his side as one might a lance. He held it primed to strike.

Meanwhile, Simone Keanes had taken a long step backwards, which brought him against the couch, and he fell onto its cushions, but he did not look despondent, and indeed, Earls was grinning again with a murderous lust brimming in his eyes.

“Buddy Kelly,” Earls said, “where is your father?”

Keanes was back on his feet, patting his hair with his broad hands.

“We don't know where he is. Okay?” said Buddy Kelly. His arm was a piston awaiting combustion. *“We don't know where he is!”*

“Okay,” Earls said, raising his right arm. He opened his fist and placed his hand very slowly, very tentatively, onto Buddy's shoulder.

“Okay. That's good, I believe you. It's just that --”

Earls's left hand struck out and yes, Buddy Kelly's arm recoiled quick as an adder, yes, he would have done it, but the spike stopped like a car hitting a wall and it was not in Earls' thick chest for Earls had caught the leg at its unbroken shaft and twisted it around with his formidable strength, and Buddy Kelly was forced to release it else have his wrist snapped.

“It's just that,” Earls said calmly, chucking the stake onto the couch behind him, “he owes someone a lot of money. Someone you don't want to be in debt to. But we believe you, don't we Keanes? He's been gone a long time?”

“Nine weeks,” Catherine Kelly said, her voice chilled.

She picked up the flowers, shaking, held the card under Earls's eyes.

“I've initiated a separation,” she said. “We're not part of it anymore.”

Earls read.

“Okay, okay, fine,” he said. “He owns this flat?”

She nodded.

“Okay, we'll start with that.”

He turned and made for the door, Simon Keanes on his heels.

“Someone will come by and make arrangements with you,” Earls said. “If you're good it won't be me and Keanes. I like your spirit little wolverine.” His laugh was like the draff of a bathtub draining. “He thought I was Dracula, Keanes.”

Buddy Kelly looked to his mother. He saw the tears bleeding down her cheeks.

She watched Earls strut away – a bulldog, she thought – willing his little pate with its heinous curls out the door. But he stopped by the pictures, removing one from the shelf. He turned on his heels.

“My, how pretty,” Earls said. “Where's she by the way? Hiding in her room?”

“Somewhere you'll never know,” Buddy Kelly said.

“Fair enough,” Earls said, wagging a stocky finger. “Don't make me come find out.”

They finally left Catherine and Buddy Kelly, and the tall henchman closed the door quietly, with the thick oak wiping away a last spooky vision of his beady wooden eyes, potholed under his bulging forehead.

Catherine Kelly sat down, exhausted. Her son put his hand on her back, to rise and fall with her pulsing heart.

He picked up the flowers. The card was from Tums, that incompetent hack who called himself a detective. It read:

Mrs Kelly,

All leads gone dry re: W. I've done all I can w. budget.

Time to move on?

News on C. Need to meet.

Wishes,

TK

The Kellys had once lived in a beautiful old house, at least, that's how she thought of it, even after the accident. It was not exemplary of any architectural style but still, to them, it was palatial. It had a large garden like most of the homes in the Dalphiney suburbs, but then they had moved to this flat in *Hoopoe Heights*.

They had upended their lives when the children had still been young, and it was spacious she could admit, and the kitchen was slick and it was right in the city's heart, right in the field of fluttering lights. He had insisted the location would be a good thing for his business, for the impression of strangers, though she never fully understood why. And they had come and she had taken care to beautify the space, instilling it with a timid medley of fresh-herb cooking and buttery soaps.

But after the visitation of Earls and Simon Keanes, Catherine and her son – but especially her – found it to be all too much, too many echoing voices in the empty air, too much all at once. And this feeling of being dungeoned with the ghouls of memory, helped in a way to justify the fact that they must sell their home, to pay back the salesman's debt. It was all they could do to shut the visions of that aberrant duo away. Soon they would move again.

But the visit had resulted in more than their eviction. It marked signposts in each of their histories: for Catherine, it signalled the beginning of her slow descent into premature dementia. She never quite regained her composure. She was never quite the same woman whom Ms. Chirps had described to Sollie Oldfield in the staffroom just that very day as a *full* person, a complete person. Did she give up on coherence, with her family broken, the pain of coherence?

As for Buddy Kelly, hope was not lost. It was he who would continue to catalyse those sparks of joy and pride that would still spout from within her eyes from time to time, as if from a grinder's brush.

For Buddy Kelly, the incident unbridled an anger. It exposed a gnawing curiosity he could no longer deny, that would set him on a journey into the wilderness of another world, set him on the trail of his absconded father. And perhaps when he found him, he would accuse him, he did not know. He would confront him surely, for abandoning his wife, his son and daughter. Or perhaps his well-nurtured contempt would collapse and he would embrace the man. Perhaps he would cower again in a nook of his mighty shadow, beg him to come home, with or without the wealth he had always frenzied for.

It was rumoured that most of the residents here in Azania's middle floors had been miscreants in their worlds. Florence passed between two rows of monastically bent backs, appraising the clothed shapes of the convicted and the banished.

Filtered through the outer walls, the early afternoon sunshine was cut into crucifix stamps, mottling these ranks of newly-come Azanians, burning holes into the natural shadow of this place that was its ether. She regarded the foreign born found refuge, squinting through their sunshine scars.

Florence was a strong woman. The current of her thoughts flowed down a long, rational course. She heard the stream burble, watched it bend, and often it would branch into tangential offshoots, but very seldom did it divert into a puddle, like the thoughts of so many of the iffy people she encountered on the floors, who seemed to exude a stagnation. They seemed troubled, especially of late, mired with worry.

And then, also physically, she was strong. If you watched her, both attributes were there, quietly adorning her person, evident at times like these in the way she deftly, coolly, pushed her trolley.

She pushed and the wheels rolled over the concrete, skating its unshedable black skin. She sensed her rounds were almost finished for the day – she could tell by the rhythm of her thoughts. It was more or less time for the elevator to come (although she couldn't quite predict the exact moment), but she knew well that the interval between its leaving and arriving fluctuated from floor to floor, decreasing incrementally when you were above the tower's middle. Still, she would be ready today.

Florence was relieved, covertly proud, because she had almost covered the entire expanse of white-red-red in roughly five hours. Her cart was performing magically well since its meticulous servicing. It seemed to be sailing on black ice, and as she pushed gently she steered the front swivel-wheels with her taut arms as if, through cogs and tackle, merely tipping a rudder.

Outside the wind was stirring. It whipped through the rusty walls' open apertures, wooing the indwellers with its long oboe notes into a yawny drowsiness. How the wind could bluster up here! How it could howl for hours and days! It carried now the salty flavour of the sea, and its unannounced waltz unsettled the orange warmth from the fires.

As she passed, Florence tapped each man and woman on the shoulder along the line, right row, then left, and like an air-hostess she distributed a package to every one in turn. As they turned she offered each an understanding smile, inspecting their grateful concoction of features. She nodded with bold beneficence at these newly-sheltered, and she could see from the genetic sum, it was true, they were not born here. She gave them, one by one, a sealed plastic packet filled with discs of dried fruit; handed over companionably.

Some recognised her and said hello. She recognised some of them too, from her previous visit so many days ago, at a time when the butchered outside light had seared and everyone had sweated stink. The four fireplaces, marking the corners of an invisible square and the middle rim of each floor, were dormant then, their blazes uncalled-for. They were burning now. It was getting cooler and the rainy season was beginning again, and clothes needed help in drying, and the water was too cold to bathe with unheated.

“Fruit today,” she said softly, every now and then.

The denizens took their bags without question.

At the end of the row she remembered her mandate to turn her trolley only right, and thus, weaving through the rows of benches became ruled like a logic puzzle. She must only turn right. She must reach everyone, not just the bench-bound sorters, but those scrubbing the racked linen by the taps, the cleaners and sweepers too, the stokers and those traipsingly keeping peace, the few certified children, and she must try not to retrace her path. Her trolley was emptying rapidly and the elevator would soon come.

She had implemented many items from her collection to complete the trolley maintenance. She had done the job before sleep had smothered her last night, spent on white-red-black: also a predominately foreigner level of the tower.

Florence had collected her tools while pushing her trolley over the years. Whilst doing the rounds, she was always secretly trawling the floors for their miscellaneous treasures. And it was amazing the things she had found, scattered and unclaimed in shadows and corners like homeless mice. She kept them now in a navy pouch, which was slung across her trunk like a pageant sash, the strap positioned between her breasts.

Florence had used the small silver coin on the wheel-guard screws – the one she had neatly clipped many years before; she had left the bronze one round for its invariable future use – and she had used the orange-headed pin to scratch Azania's copious black grime out from the bearings and all the grooves between the surfaces. She had used her compact pliers on the wheel nuts, and four of her precious elastic bands (though she was mournfully aware they would wear through soon), one looped over each wheel, so that

each had a stripe of dull brown bisecting its puck-rubber face. In all, her alterations had made the load seem delightfully buoyant today, light and nimble, and although it wouldn't last, it seemed to her inconceivable that her contented mood might depreciate; that the humdrum might yet corrode it.

She wound her way through the tight avenues that made up the traversable labyrinth of the storey, between the work benches and the thick steel columns, past the chicken-wire fence which reached to the high ceiling and surrounded the elevator shaft. Above her was a peach grid of thick horizontal steel, with rows of heavy floor beams laid across it like piano keys (with bits of their reinforced-bar skeletons here and there poking out). She turned only right, although it felt unnatural to do so, for she had flipped the front swivel-wheels and also the fixed rear ones yesterday, but their hard-edged asymmetry (like trapeziums viewed from the front) was worrying.

A cloud of chatter washed the air, lose and indistinct, like in a busy supermarket or library, underlaid by the assiduous scraping and dabbing of production. The mechanised pulse from the elevator shaft loudly came.

The four curtain walls muzzled the outside sky and surrounds, like arrowslits once did in ancient castles. It was as if the whole of Azania was wallpapered in the same glowing pattern, the same bright, metre-high crosses of blue and grey.

Florence pushed her trolley and looked to its metal nest. There remained thirty or so machine-sealed packages, vacuumed flat with their plastic skins rumped against the squashed produce, all identical, all with that little white sticker in the centre, marked with the numerals 0068. All the packages she had even distributed had had this number, in spite of their contents, and she didn't let it bother her, but she didn't quite know why.

She estimated there were twenty to thirty, say twenty-five parcels left. She scanned around the warmly peopled area, made a quick check in her head. This was good: there was surplus today.

As Florence came to the last row, her algorithm almost perfect, she thought of her daughter, Leena, who was a hundred or so metres and unthinkable hours below. She wondered who was the surrogate currently engaged in shaping her mind, and she tapped a man's shoulder who had long, springy brown hair.

He shot up violently, so unexpectedly, twisting around with a mannequin's agility, his feet remaining angled towards the bench. He was clasping his sorting tool, had it raised in the air like a dagger, his green eyes sharpened by an animal warp. They stared at each other, equally startled, the long-haired man breathing heavily, manically, a ferocity mangling his mouth. He held his pose. Her heart fluttered. There was a moment of

silence, with all extraneous data blocked out or else the others had quietened, while both parties tried to comprehend the situation they found themselves in. He seemed at a loss for what to do.

“Relax, Sims. It's not your man,” came a voice from across the bench.

Jolted out of the frozen scene by the voice, Florence realigned to her routine. She offered the worker his due. She gripped the package firmly. You're mad, she thought, you don't belong here. She held his glare, responded with channelled and unflinching calm.

“Fruit today,” she said, not quite smiling.

“Oh,” he said. His dagger arm crumpled, flopped meekly to his side, lost now of its kinetic potential. Sims took the package. “Thank you,” he said, “so sorry.”

Sims uncoiled his trunk, sat down shiftily, gingerly, as if just snapped from hypnotism, his brain reset, under study by a full auditorium. Florence watched from above as he wrapped his scabby-backed hands around his head, fingering through the dark knots.

Florence pushed her trolley forward with barely any force, not like when it was full and the wheels were jammed skew, when she had had to lean and thrust from her calves, and she revisited a thought, recently left upstream.

She thought: this place does not need volatility, disorder. This place does not need Godless creatures from the outside, from wherever they might come. This is Azania. This world deserves reverence and appreciation and therein harmony can be restored, and children can grow up to love Aunt Nancy who guards us and keeps us from man's affliction.

She tapped a shoulder, gave over the fruit, and was grateful for the reminder, for the reaffirmation of her doctrine – that outsiders do not belong here. She believed in this wholly. She believed their influence accounted for the prevailing restive energy of late, that they were responsible for the dogmatic prophesies, for the talk of heathens organising on the outside – for the doubt. She pushed her trolley with strong, short strides and felt a smugness enfold her mind, thinking of the power of her composed will.

As she moved through the lanes towards the beds on the mountain end of Azania, she straightened her back and tensed all the consummate muscles that wrapped from her spine around her neck and shoulders and torso, amplifying these contoured packs which were like spreads of armour under her thin cotton shirt and skin. For she felt there were eyes watching her, and she felt profoundly thankful that she had the chance to stand up straight, to flex, to grow her figure upwards, unlike those hunched over men, with their militant up-cast eyes, who surely were watching her now. Florence, strong and intelligent, a distributor, did not believe herself miscast.

She approached a group of youths who were sitting by a corner mattress (a massive divan in the outer rim), and around it on the floor two of them sat, lethargically engaged in a game of dice.

Washington, she recognised, and Pinkie, and scrawny Achille. There was also another boy, whose name she could not place. They stood up, looking eager, left the single die on floor. They crowded around her trolley.

“Florence, back so soon,” said Washington, a young man with a keen, confident face.

“Hi. Hi Washington,” she said. “It doesn't feel so soon. Another full cycle.”

“I guess every day must be the end of a full cycle for you,” he said and looked into the trolley, his eyebrows raised curiously.

“Banana apparently,” she said. “Go on. Take two.”

The others presented sulky faces.

“All of you, you poor little rats, looking at me like you haven't been fed for months.”

Washington took out eight packages and threw them gently to his three compatriots, keeping two for himself. He ripped one expertly open with his teeth; the other he slipped into his track-pants pocket. The other children followed suite and they stood masticating like so many cows, eyes aimed upwards, as if there they might see the shades of flavour they were tasting.

Washington was, in Florence's opinion, a fine young man. She liked his mien, how it seemed to portray an inner inquisitiveness, an ardent sensibility suited to learning and reason. And he also seemed a happy person, who looked after his appearance, and because she saw all this in him, she generously likened him to a version of herself she hoped she had grown from.

She thought him ideal for the attenuated role she played in Azania's harmony, that he might push her trolley when it was time for her to rest (though he would need to experiment with new wheels) – or at least, until her daughter came of age.

Washington chucked a few more of the blanched circles into his mouth, ruminating their taste with comical expressiveness. He nodded, appeased, offered the bag forward.

Florence pointed to the remaining bag in her trolley and contracted her finger. Washington grabbed it and flicked it up to her.

“Not bad, Florence, not bad. There's been worse,” he said suavely, as if unaffected by the discovery of the exotic stuff.

Florence tasted some. “Not bad at all,” she said.

“Banana?” asked Pinkie. She was shorter than Washington, and had a clean, pretty, tan face, her eyes slanted slightly upwards at her temples. From her lean trunk, covered in a

lilac jersey, protruded two lumps like heaps of sugar; the modest beginnings of breasts (and unprecedented troubles, Florence thought).

“That’s what they tell me. Banana, apricot, raisins ... apple, takes a bit of work to get them down,” Florence said.

“Better than the prunes,” said Washington. “You live the charmed life Florence. Bet your shit’s harder than bone.”

Pinkie punched him solidly on the shoulder.

“What? Don’t tell me you haven’t noticed the difference in your turds after Florence has stopped by? We’re always grateful to you, our shaper of turds. Bet the Dassies will love these, hey Achille? Some yummy bait.”

The scrawny boy nodded shyly.

“You staying with us tonight?” Washington said. The four youths all gripped the trolley’s rim, chewing contentedly.

Florence glanced over her shoulder to the elevator shaft, her solid neck uncreased. “Not tonight, down to white-red-blue, and I must say I’m quite relieved to be leaving here. Is it me or are there some crazies around? You had any trouble?”

The youths looked at each other conspiratorially. Pinkie elbowed Washington, “Show her,” she said in a stage-whisper.

“Florence,” said Washington, “that guy who jumped you, they say he is waiting to cut someone. To kill someone. And they say that there are people who are living on the outside ... actually living. Not the outcasts, not the beasts from the ruins. Actually living, under the sky. They say they have real bananas.”

“Show me what Washington?” she said, sounding motherly.

He turned and sat on the mattress, which was up against the pillars that hugged the mountain’s rocky south face. He flipped onto his front and crawled in a diagonal towards the bed’s edge, to where neat piles of folded clothes and shoes lay by an immense latticed column.

Pinkie stayed by the trolley, her fingers woven into its silver cage, but watched the other two follow excitedly, and Florence too, clambered over the mattress, feeling suddenly stiffened by a foreboding dread.

“This man was telling us,” Washington said quietly. “He was shouting, ranting about this and that ... about slavery. He refused to work. He said we were all prisoners. Is it true about other people?”

Washington tossed a puffy red jacket aside and then stripped back a plastic cover, taken from the ablution areas. Florence and the others bunched around Washington, the lot on

their knees, like desperate hunters around a warthog's burrow, and saw there a man, seemingly calmly asleep, in his deathmask of fallow skin.

Florence regarded him sadly. He had not understood where he was. How lucky he had been. Given a chance for peace.

"They say Aunt Nancy has become ill," Washington was saying. "So sick and angry that he has forgotten how to look after us."

"That's enough," she said. "I want you to wrap him up and put him in my trolley."

"Is it true Florence? You must know?" Washington asked, undeterred by her seriousness.

"Washington, dear boy," she said, the four of them sitting by the body, Achille on his crossed legs, "there are parts of the world that continue to exist. This I cannot doubt. But it is all over an ugly place. Ugly. Where people prey upon each other. Where people *use* each other as if their brothers and sisters are no more than talking meat. Aunt Nancy is weak, it is true, his heart is full of sorrow because ... do you know why?"

"He is lonely," Achille said, looking up to Florence, his dark eyes sparkling.

"That's right. You young men do not know what it is like to have a child that is growing old and you are not there to see. You will learn eventually, when you have children of your own. But it is true, he has been absent. And these people have come in, who think they know Paradise. But are they fed every day on the outside? Are they kept safe? Do they have family like we do, who sing them songs when they are sad? Who lie with them when the rain seems to never stop and the cold makes you shiver?"

"Is the Son coming?" asked Washington.

Florence smiled knowingly; he was still just a boy. "I believe he is, yes. He is coming soon. Who knows, maybe he will come tomorrow. Wouldn't that be exciting? If he came tomorrow? Or the next day? There is nothing out there for us, my children. There is no hope. Only death. And Aunt Nancy gives us hope. There is nothing out there that you cannot find here. Do you believe me?"

"I believe you," said Washington, and Achille nodded shyly.

"Wrap him up. Put him in my trolley."

Florence returned to her trolley, leaned on the blue plastic bar with its familiar shine. She pushed it up against the pillar, helped the boys lift the rigid board, once a man, a length of orange plastic now his funeral shroud, into the hold.

"Washington," she said, "I've got something for you."

His eyes lit up.

She fished in her pouch, the tip of her tongue protruding out over her lips – there – her fingers found its form, a perfect cube. She gave him the red die.

“Ah,” he said, crestfallen. “Anything else?”

She glanced over her shoulder. The thick platform was just sliding into view. As it sunk slowly through the air, the market sounds dissolved into the humming noise among them, its voices joining the fracas. Some residents were already standing up, stretching, enticed by the descending scent of hot soup.

“Florence!” he said desperately. “What about Dudu?”

“Oh yes.” She withdrew from her back-pocket a length of pink ribbon.

He took it eagerly, felt it between his finger tips, smiled. Just a child.

“I must go,” she said.

She waved goodbye, pushing her unexpected cargo quickly to the hoistway.

What was she thinking? Had the current run off course? Something had come unstuck.

She was a strong woman, almost thirty now, and although anyone could have the opportunity, anyone, any day, to stroll over to the north wall and there, peer out over the broken city, to see there the evidence of a barbarous world, it was merely a question of faith.

There you could see the mountain diminishing, the rollicking shrubland diminishing down to the central depression, to the dead city's broken houses, its crumbling high-rises. You could look out all the way over the rubble, over the sweepings of that old necropolis, over to the docks where some of the steel giraffes still stood tall and feigned purpose, their necks stretched and rigid, their sharp, long-suffering faces set forward as they waited. The tide was gently bumping around their feet, hastening, insistent, “When will you fall?” it nagged, “When will you buckle?” the nagging sea endless to the horizon. There it spread and it there it was to see, mankind's newfangled glory, and although it was all around them, the weeded, greedy past, you merely had to believe. Ask the outcasts. Ask them, if you can find any alive, ask them how it is out there and alone. Or else, have they been enslaved again?

You just had to believe that salvation was coming soon.

It *had* to be Sollie Oldfield's car. Not many of her friends still owned the damned things, let alone one with a tow-bar. Most citizens elected to make use of Dalphiney's comprehensive public transport system, taking the underway, occasionally the taxies and spurious buses.

Some even rode bicycles, sitting up straight on their seats, their faces flushed with that cockiness of the righteous trendsetter, releasing the handle-bars altogether for a stretch, seemingly invulnerable in their quaint, shiny helmets.

Of course, they weren't invulnerable – nor from 'helmet-hair', surely a deterrent for some – and although a nice idea, green and healthy, Dalphiney was not ready for the revolution, as innocuous as it might have been. The roads were yet reserved for the the automobile, for its surging momentum, which was struggled to containment, at the best of times, between two measly pavement shoulders. The pavements themselves were far from cyclable, but gauntlets of faffing pedestrians, hawkers and trees.

Consequentially, the streets were best experienced from within a cage of steel and metal. Buddy Kelly could appreciate this now, besieged on all sides by hurtling impatience. Yet he wondered, if so many people had finally resigned their keys, necessitating the Kellys' usurpation of Oldfield's chick-yellow hatchback for the day, then why were there so many of the damned things clustered throughout this grey network, like photons queued from the sun?

One way in which to appreciate the mythic enormity of Dalphiney is to attempt to drive through it. They had been *en route* for well over forty minutes and the traffic, which a seasoned commuter would attest, was relatively light at this time of day, being a Monday, early afternoon, and there were no blustering clouds bullying drivers along, threatening to slick the roads and disable uninsulated engines. And yet they had barely crossed the city core (where the trees seemed to shrink alongside the buildings absurdly upsurging). They had barely dissected a dart's hole inside the bullseye – although the roads seldom had fewer than three lanes in either direction.

It was so monstrous and unsignposted by landmarks – there were certain splendidly inimitable buildings used by locals for orientation – that if you found yourself without bearings somewhere in its alleys, without a phone in thick Dalphiney night, it might be

sensible to be afraid lest you wandered deeper, further from whatever place you knew to be safe.

Buddy Kelly had met Oldfield, the owner of the car, once, and then once again, apparently neither party fully crediting the memorability of the initial occasion. Buddy Kelly had expected as much; he understood the sheer numbers of young people teachers were exposed to, students who were passed under their charge for a brief set of years, and how each educator singled out their protégés, their people of interest. He also understood how this expectation during introductions – to be forgotten – tended to be self-fulfilling. But he had a picture of the man to call to mind, a reduced caricature, and it matched perfectly the wretched old Toyota.

Sollie Oldfield had a very large, very shiny, ellipsoid head, complete with his notorious comb-over, which bridged the pair of scrubs at each ear, its wispy threads perpetually undulating as if entranced by an inaudible punji. He wore glasses and had a second chin like an life-raft under his round face. He was the type of man who, when approaching another in a corridor or doorway, was so consciously fearful of causing any inconvenience or muddle, that he would feign dodging left in a shuffle, stepping right in the same manner and then leaving again, hoping the contender called his bluff. Of course, by this time, the two would already be on top of each other, doing an epileptic dance like two mimes feeling out the same wall. By this time, Oldfield would be cooing apologetically.

He was the type of man who looks afraid when avoiding eye-contact. He was bumbling, loudly unobtrusive, like an eccentric, rust-patched little car (severely glitchy but somehow functional), painted in overripe yellow.

Sollie Oldfield was a science teacher at St. Lukes, the esteemed co-ed high-school on Rattlepod road. He was quietly intelligent and absent-minded, dressed year-round in a donkey jacket. A good teacher, she insisted; thrilled by the allure of tranquil woodwork, by the way in which things consistently submitted to the laws of physics, and although it would be hard to imagine that it was the pull of shaping young minds which brought him into the profession, he could conjure up little analogies and right-hand thumb rules like an amateur magician. It was thus only apt that he should have, attached to the back of his vehicle, a tow-bar.

Buddy Kelly had to concentrate to operate the machine with its knobs and pedals and panels of clicking buttons which you could feasibly imagine cutting circuits and turning cranks like the analogue controls of a U-boat. He felt a trickle of sweat run down his back – there was, obviously, no airconditioning, and the sole unjammed vent gave a tortured

squeal with its payload of warm air. He cringed at the thought of the spongy seat, the tight synthetic fabric, Oldfield saturated.

Buddy Kelly hadn't driven much in his life.

He believed he was on 23rd avenue and heaved the growling vehicle into the right turn lane, and was at that point of mental over-encumbrance (when there is too much to worry about to worry at all), when his mother, bracing herself against the passenger door and the peeling roof, made a lunge at the dial above the rectangular cavity in the dashboard – which must have been an eight-track or tape-deck, Buddy couldn't be sure. A peppy, poppy rock song flooded the cabin.

“This is them,” she said after a moment. “I think this is them.”

“Them?” he replied, incredulous.

“Arcade... Arcane... Arc...”

Buddy Kelly took his eyes off a van's glowing brake-lights to turn to her and roll them theatrically skyward.

“Arctic. Something flame. Or furnace.”

“Archimedes's fart?” he said and smiled.

Catherine Kelly, a high school English teacher, was overdue for retirement.

She liked to imagine, on account of her casual rapport with the coming-of-age teenagers, that she was privy to inside information to do with those popular-culture explosions which come to be termed global phenomena. She liked to believe that she chaired a secret council of cool, her classroom the gatekeepers' chamber of deliberation. And she was right, in a way, but she failed to realise that the kids were (for the most part) already on the receiving end of the feedback loop, that the relevant superstars or hairstyles were already hackneyed by the time she remembered the name.

This, however, did not deter her. He had once thought she was sickly when, for a full week, she appeared pale and dark-eyed, around the time of the vampire fad. Yet, she spoke of these discoveries with a type of reverence. Although Buddy Kelly presumed her initial professional motivations similar to those of Oldfield – borne of the need for something to do – her attitude demonstrated a belief in, a respect for her students, their maturity and burgeoning intelligence.

“You know this isn't *them*,” Buddy Kelly said.

“I'm sure it is, what's the name! I recognise the voice and the bells.”

It was true. Hand bells: adding a not so unpleasant pastoral layer to the tune – it was evidently becoming increasingly difficult to be original.

“The bells' are a give away,” he said. “Hells' Bells maybe?”

“Anyway, they're going to be the next big thing. You watch.”

“I wouldn't be surprised. With those bells. They're already all over the radio.”

She pinched him hard at that soft spot on the back of his arm and he flinched, mid gear-change, and the car howled, all grinding parts, nearly stalling.

He laughed nervously, flapping her off with his elbows, for he genuinely feared the clamping force of those fingertips, a follow on attack, their precision and manicured nails.

The sun's reflection pooled in the bonnet's hailstone dents; it emblazoned a web around an impact point in the windscreen. Buddy Kelly surveyed the thickly populated city blocks through eyes narrowed to slits, everywhere volleyed snippets of light, everywhere the walking, plotting citizens, and who knows all the names of things punctuating their spectrum of thoughts, the desire and paranoia, that surely ranged from unimpeachable misery to the rowdiest of elation.

23rd avenue had its commercial towers, its apartments and branded offices, all spilling forth, to jaywalk haphazardly, the surviving, the managed and the managers.

On street level, there was the glass of foyers and malls, pawn shops and family convenience stores with prices painted in white on the panes, glinting in the hot day.

Buddy Kelly drove with both hands on the wheel. He slapped down what he thought to be the indicator and a wiper flubbed across the dusty back window. He tried the other lever.

They neared a busy intersection, an impromptu market for black-market goods; for knock-off sunglasses (he could do with a pair now), shoe holders, dvds, earnest magazines. And here, too, the veterans of despicable fate dotted like refuse the shallow island between the vendors and the traffic lights, supine under their neon-stalked flowers, under the buds of green, orange and the red no one could ignore. Here too, were the wretched.

And after decades of practice and refinement of technique, some still shouted (the man there, with knee stump jabbed in the frame of a rotting crutch, like a parody pirate in nicotine rags, in his croûton skin), *Please!*, they still screamed from their eyes. *Please!* Please can I have some of your money – and this man knew better than pain, he knew better than you did, that the money was yours. The vultures and victims. Dung beetles that would make a home of your shit. Through rain, wind, storms of noncomprehension, the African sun, the darkness. And you'd say, “Money don't come for free mate.”

“They still ask about you, you know.”

Buddy Kelly looked away from the beggar, willing the robot green. He thought of the picture of himself in his mother's classroom. It sat on her orderly desk amidst cupped

stationery and books and stacks of tests marked in green. It was from a few years ago, when he had long hair and a silver ring in his plump bottom lip, when he had been willingly trapped, beaming his twenty-something smile, a shameless naïveté, for all time.

“Do they?” he said with marked disaffection.

“The girls practically swoon, 'Mam' does he have a girlfriend? Is he married?”

Her smile was mischievous but did not entice him. It spoke more for, what he believed to be, her distorted regard of him, its hyperbolic fabrications.

It was a curious thing to be the son of a teacher; he had passed through that very school, St. Luke's, as Mrs Kelly's son (although he never was in any of her classes), and had experienced a strange distance from the authenticity the other kids seemed to experience for being students, who completely bought into their roles, who trusted in the hierarchy and authority, seemingly unaware that those who would instruct them were mostly normal people.

Buddy Kelly had heard through his bedroom door, from around the dinner table, many unsavoury insights into their scandalously regular lives. And he had never been any good with girls.

“Any cuties' you can vouch for?” he said.

“Sis. You're too old to be saying things like that.”

“If there's grass on the wicket.”

She darted her pincers at his tricep, but he evaded and caught her hand. He looked at her sternly, back to the road: joke's over.

“There're out of my league anyway,” he said lightheartedly.

“Damn right.”

It wasn't that Buddy Kelly did not enjoy this close bond with his mother. Indeed, it was for exactly this reason that he shied away from it of late; it was because these glimpses of energy, of mental attune, reminded him of their wonderful relationship, of a time when her eyes had been bright and playful. When underlying every look, was a soft-spoken dare, a challenge to not be entranced, to look away. A time ago when from around her visage, most potently when she smiled, contagious vapours would disperse through a room, a pheromone of voluntary entrapment.

The more people there the fuller she had beamed, as if gathering energy to convert and syphon back, to be shared in jokes and anecdotes about an endearingly peculiar life. But now it was just fool's gold, a mirage he loathed to grasp at, in case it rippled away around his fingers.

“Aren't you excited?” she asked.

He grunted in response.

They had finally made it to the robots, that autocratic white line. He screwed up his face (the way one does when expecting an imminent collision), coaxing the yellow hatchback, with crude trailer in tow, across the on-coming lane.

They made it, nearly there, Acacia then left onto Umzimbeet street. He was now sweating profusely, symptoms of an unfortunate trait inherited from his father.

Catherine Kelly had once been a popular socialite. She had once been the centre of the party – of which she had many. Now, not even the makeup she applied every morning – she had thankfully rescinded the vampire phase – peering into the mirror and shaking her head was the ritual, scraping it out the fissures every night to save the pillow and anyone the sight of her, none of her vain exertions could conceal the wear time had wrought on her face. She was old and dying more rapidly than ever before, more dramatically than ever before. Her skeleton was locking up, her mind was drifting.

Even the school was trying to egg her on to retirement, encouraging her to take her long-pending long-leave. They had even taken to organising informal meetings in which they would gently discuss the school's policy on severance.

She had been a good teacher, loyal and committed, but like the children shepherded through puberty and deregistered with a handshake and a wish of good-luck, teachers too must be let into the world, their brief tenures served.

He glanced at her – he was supposed to be watching the road, but he must know – and he saw her mechanical eyes, flicked around by tiny servos, sucking in light to be processed and expelled as stale, ingratiating murmurs.

“I’ve always wanted a place with sturdy wooden floors,” she was saying, “like when I was a girl who played soccer. I’ve told you about our creaking floors, haven’t I cherub?”

She had a habit of batting her eyelids when she spoke of her past, which must have been bewitching once. “I remember,” Buddy Kelly said. “The creaking passage; and you would count the times anyone went to the toilet.”

She nodded in a forward motion, as if the passenger seat was a rocking chair. It still seemed she hadn't come to fully accept her daughter was dead. She pretended instead, made up stories and plastered on that wide grin every morning.

“Well let’s hope it isn’t *that* loud here,” he said.

“You'll get used to it,” his mother said, rubbing his forearm.

They turned onto Umzimbeet, a long flat street lined on either side by resting cars and ancient bricked tenements.

She had tutored him in the ways of the world as an equal, a companion, and he had always been grateful, and he seemed to understand in his quiet, thorough way, the real meaning in the lessons.

The truth was (and Buddy Kelly would admit it to himself later) he was particularly stressed just then, overwhelmed by the anxieties and considerations of moving homes. They were in a limbo of place, moving all their prioritised possessions, mourning the pawned ones, weary over building a new sanctuary for sleep, defeating the unknown smells and meeting the habitants – and that damned car. Forgetting the past.

He was on edge, mildly resentful that he should put his own life on hold to resettle yet again.

He was angry at her for getting old. He thought: this was surely to be her final beginning. She was a turtle outrunning a drought, imploring her insides with every clodded step for some stability, for the recognisability of past things, neatly arranged. She had always been mom, but she had once been Catherine Kelly, once a vigil of order and shrine of decision, where people would worship if they needed advice about which was the most sensible route to take. And she would doll it out generously for the reward of reverent, slightly humiliated smiles.

“It’s here cherub.” She pointed with stippled hand.

He knew where it was. He parked as best he could – his sparse experience showing – like slotting backwards into a file of ants, with the sharp corner of the trailer poking into the street. The trailer was piled high with the chattel they couldn’t spare: couches, coffee tables, fridge; a fold-up futon strapped gangly on top.

Buddy Kelly alighted, ready to toil, resigned to a desperate energy. He wore a look he had studied on his father, a look that said: There is a lot to be done here, and I am the one who is going to have to do it.

“We should probably get the keys first, cherub,” Catherine Kelly said. “What do you want me to do?”

“Just relax, okay mom, I’ll sort it out,” he said attacking the trailer straps, ‘already in a huff,’ she would have said of the salesman. He had no idea where to begin.

Umzimbeet street was like most in the city of Dalphiney. Both sides of the tar were dashed with mature, thick-trunked trees: blue gums, walnuts and acorns; pepper and plane trees, with the occasional eruption of royal purple (the anomalous blossom of the jacaranda). From the sky it all looked like a battleground, foliage and chequered slabs enmeshed in war.

In rumours of a forgotten history, there were once expansive grasslands where the city now sprawled. Dry savanna of a rich cream, inhabited here and there by nomadic beasts and thorny-canopied jackal-berries. But Dalphiney became and since had no end, with people like sand spread over every surface, over ever horizon. Presciently, the city was made to breathe on its own.

Like most in Dalphiney, the streets were lined on either side by tall buildings, some with flower-silled, brick façades (like their new home at *Spear Hall*), and in the city everything worked like an antiquated airport luggage system, with an air of disorder.

Having never crossed its borders, like so many of the city's born and bred, Buddy Kelly took this for granted; that there was always water, always electricity, and at the end of a designated weekday, depending on where you were, you just had to flop your rubbish into a bin and it might be pilfered but by evening it would be gone, and no one would ever comment on your personal assortment of waste.

Spear Hall's blue door was open.

Buddy Kelly stepped out from the brightness, into the fusty foyer. He appeared as just released from a cataract clinic, as if slightly mystified by all the colours and shapes confronting him, yet with purpose coerced into his stride.

To his left was the alcove that housed the reception. It had a length of hardboard hinged to the brick wall, on top of which sat an open visitor book and a bell. Behind the counter sat Michael, the super-intendant. His skimpy frame was packed into a leather jacket and he had coarse dreadlocks, like broken filaments, drooping halfway down his back.

Michael looked slightly perplexed, like an invigilator busy allaying boredom, hovering a pen over some tabular document. On the stair (that one need step on to for assistance) was a youngish, sturdy man, squatting churlishly, his arms folded, his feet parted for balance.

Buddy Kelly found focus, complied their forms. He blinked a strength into his aspect, a benign self-assertion, before meeting each, eye to eye. This was a pre-emptive measure against their scrutiny, a barricade to block their judgement, as if his unprotected eyes would otherwise expose some unabstracted and condemning truth. Buddy Kelly then nodded, greeted the men, his fortitude immediately undermined by his molten voice.

The younger man nodded back, grinning.

Michael stood up and thrust out his hand, as if it was his right to supervene.

“Mr Kelly, I'm Michael,” he said. “Welcome to Spear Hall”.

Michael half-bowed, stretching his lips to reveal a generous set of teeth. Buddy Kelly clasped his hand tightly, remembering his father's sermons on the importance of a strong handshake, of first-impressions.

“Thanks.”

The unidentified figure had by now relinquished his position on the step. He had a sharp goatee that was apple-yellow like the ponytail pulled back evenly from his high forehead, and Buddy Kelly estimated that he couldn't be much older than himself.

“This is Mr Behr,” Michael said, “one of two, God save us. He was just running along.”

Michael reached up to an array of hooks mounted on the wall inside the alcove. He tossed a key, with a skull-and-crossbones keyring, to the Behr brother, who caught it deftly.

The Behr brother beamed a smile, slipped the ring around his finger. He said, “Hello Neighbour,” while performing a sweeping flourish (perhaps mocking Michael's formality). He shook Buddy's hand and bounded up the stairs with a jingle.

“He'll be right down to help you with your stuff,” Michael shouted to the ceiling. “Big strong boy, that. Well, Mr Kelly, let's get you settled into your new home.”

“We've got a few heavy things,” Buddy Kelly said.

“Not to worry, not to worry. And here's your key, 603, all ready and waiting.”

Buddy Kelly strolled out behind the eager receptionist. Buddy was not particularly affected by the latter's baby-blue jeans, tight as body-paint, nor by his flamboyant strut, his skimpy sandals, nor by the way in which he flicked back his cat-o-nine-tail dreads, lashing at dust-motes adrift in the pillar of light, come from the low decent of day.

And as they stepped outside neither of the two noticed the gangly figure slink around the corner – the other Behr brother – running awkwardly to the locksmith, his brother grinning down from the sixth floor window.

Chester was easily the funniest fucker in the world because of his ability to improvise. This was a skill preconditional for survival as a child grown up fast, never fast enough, amidst the crowded houses and flapping tongues of *Little Farmacia*.

That the others in the game built their core tactics on different doctrines of humour (with varying success) did not change the rules: the better your skills, the better you survive. Chester was all about reading the scene, feeling the mood, articulating accordingly.

Hence, upon stepping out of the low, clammy night, through Sliver's pinned back doors, and feeling the suggestive impulse to try a new walk, he did. His black cotton suit sat snug on his round belly, its inside lined in velvety purple, in one pocket the hip-flask, in the other his extra-large set of premium brass-knuckles, his *Meat Tenderizers* (technical-polymer-injected). Thus, he penetrated the smoky murk looking like a proper gangster, if somewhat big-boned, with a somewhat misaligned knee.

Chester needed a contract. He was fat and getting fatter, looking increasingly wayworn. He seemed to have fallen out of favour in the circles; become a bit of a pariah.

He was even considering giving up the life for something less desultory, like poker maybe. He had the look for poker. The other day he had even bought a book by some or other seasoned pro turned author, which he perused during excursions to the shitter.

Free-lancing had never been easy, but in the early days he was energised with that youthful drive. He had been motivated and enterprising and it felt worthwhile performing all the extra-circular tasks that sourcing involved. He had been up for making friends and keeping them, but it was really, above all, about staying in the know. He had that itch for underworld fame and few concerns to prevent him from hunting it down.

He was good in the day, had his fair share of top clients, but he seemed to be losing his appetite. And his reputation had taken a blow, maybe because he was regarded as an old dog, and these new kids with their new tricks ... And then maybe, it couldn't be possible, but maybe someone had uncovered his dirtiest little secret. Maybe they had found out – it couldn't be, he had been very careful – but perhaps someone had found out what he did to Blossom the pornstar.

Sliver had once been a lesbian-bar, but now the Clowns had taken over, along with the drunks and story-hunters. During its rapid devolution, renamed from 'Box' to 'The Silver

Goose: Family Pub', consumption of the nachos had become akin to a local variant of Russian roulette – played, by rule, as a forfeit in dares and bets on rugby matches.

Families ill-fated enough to miss the irony and interpret the glitzy banner as sincere, who strolled in, all smiles, looking for a congenial atmosphere – the little girl politely tugging the torpid waiter's sleeve and asking for a table for five, non-smoking – received a fair deal of undue harassment bordering on verbal sodomy (drunks struggle to regulate their volume). Until the outside neon sign burnt out, and management opted to let it be. The intended had their internal compasses.

Shortly thereafter, the ingenious repositioning of the dot and Sliver it became: the old dive headquarters with a new title.

Chester had caught wind of a potential client (and they smelled rich and dirty), whose representative happened to be waiting inside for prospective entertainers. No one had been kind enough to let dear Chester know, not Blackie nor Thelma Marie, nor the client's emissaries. In the end, it was only on account of his bottom-rung email hacking skills and relentless boredom that he happened upon news of the interview.

Hence, here he was, with a shabby beard and unfashionably late.

Naturally it would be some PA or sidekick, sent to a deadbeat bar on a warm week night on behalf of some fat-cat business owner who needed anything other than another tongue tracing concentric-circles around their arse, anything but another Backslapper, Groupie, Fawner, or type like that. The client, invariably another monarch, an autocrat ruling his own army of employed, whose lap dog had been drowned a few too many times, who figured himself above it, figured life a very bad joke, or actually found it very funny.

Either way the job just as joyless. And there were always the perks; always a chance for a stupidly generous tip, if you clicked with the client (you could only hope), or a sweaty sex odyssey. Always the chance that the Exalted, the Holiest of Holies, that the Fated Patron would gracefully swoop down dribbling gold and fuck him at the same time – the nature of the business always doused in extremity. So far he had only had the sex and it hadn't been that sweaty, and that was when he still had a reputation.

He doubled as a bouncer, a vague qualification any realistic clown appended to his CV these days – “Can beat things up. Will jump in front of flying bullets” – but only as a reasonable goon. Besides his adrenal gland and *Tenderizers*, he never had a weapon unless you gave it to him and, if need be, showed him how to use it.

Along Sliver's elbow-worn bar was lined his competition, dressed-up like the flags of the Rongbuk monastery, each of whom, in their own gaudy way, reeked of a cataclysmic

drug-problem (subsequently resolved this way or that). Some, nestled between drunks, he knew, or knew of at least, their names at least.

And Songbird was a Bosmans like Chester, which is as much as to say she was a particular phylum of locust.

She too came from the esteemed neighbourhood of *Little Farmacia* – among certain circles celebrated as the funniest place in the world. More and more however, as cultures suffused into mud, those circles tended only to form around firing drum-braziers with bullet-holes for ventilation. But it counted in his favour, to be a Bosmans, and apparently none of the weasel types – as in the sycophants modelled on your personality and full of advice; the Mirrorers – had shown up, hopefully not because they'd been clawing through the grapevine and already knew the client was a dud. None of the Igors who always won the day.

The representative stood out in Sliver like a turtle-dove bathing in the soup of the day, in part because the obstinate ex-clientèle now existed only in popular pornographic folklore, but mostly because she was recognisably a woman, undeniably a woman, undeniably, in the current location, above any form of recreation or charity.

Currently she was at a side-table on a high-stool, occupied in a one-on-one interview with a Schizo (which she was savvy enough to know was always smarter than a free-for-all).

Between gurgles and rants the bar's denizens heads swivelled to peep around their shoulders; quick, slitty, sideways glances, like buffaloes regarding a clumsy man in a lion suit interrupting their breakfast.

Chester snuggled up to an anonymous leather-jacket, chosen to buffer Songbird. The decision was intuitive, like electing a urinal at a packed-out stadium. He ordered a drink. He felt unburdened by any sense of environment, any introspection. He had his mantra.

“Nice night,” Chester chirped to his draft.

A scrutinising eye was on him, sheathed in leather shoulders and greasy hair. This fellow confronted his own reflection, warped back from Chester's Wayfarer mirror-shades.

“It's blind Bosmans,” leather gibed, his glare now fixed forward. “I'm surrounded. Take off the shades won't you Bosmans. No one's to blame for their heritage. Songbird over here don't mind the light of truth all over her pretty face.”

“No one's to blame if I twist your inquisitive cunt-bastard head off,” Chester said, but no one laughed. “By the way, have you tried the linefish?”

The man smiled, almost imperceptibly, “Ok Bosmans, but wait 'til I've had my moment with the lady, would you. She's the sexiest thing I've seen since I walked in this place.”

Chester feigned a glance and gave a silent whistle.

“Who's the client?” he asked.

“Dunno,” leather jacket said.

“You have an angle?”

“The truth Bosmans, always the beautiful truth. Nine times all they want is someone to say it.”

“What truth you have, Leather? They own this place. They account for everything.”

Songbird's face eased into view. She nodded to Chester as one might to an unethical chemist turned POW.

“Chester.”

“Song.”

“Janitor here's been out on the front lines,” she said gruffly, “got all the gory details, still kept his sense of humour.”

So the leather jacket was Janitor. Chester had heard whispers about him. He was a Shocker. His humour was based around the frightening and vile situations he put himself in, day to day. Being admitted into an asylum was research for a Shocker, as well as faking association with victims of capital punishment crimes.

Chester said, “Your reputation supersedes you.”

Janitor grunted; a scowling baboshka.

“I've got one for you Bosmans,” Janitor said dryly.

To improvise is certainly not to announce the coming of a punch-line like some trumpet procession to a funeral, all fanfare and then when the coffin rolls past the thing's dead inside. Still, experience regarding these matters had shown the wealthy and bored to have all flavours of funny-bone, assorted humour fetishes like jelly-beans.

Chester was curious and had the time, having his number in the queue.

“Fire away,” he said.

“So Ben from Cleaning,” he said, making inverted commas in the air, “this guy I know. We always giving him shit about being a poofter. He never looks twice at the hottest dames. His reasoning: high standards in cunny. Even turn down a whiskeyed Jessica Rabbit strapped herself to the bed.

“So the cull's been dropped,” his left eyebrow raised and dropped like a pinball flipper. “I'm on Cleaning, and as expected, as in line with its singular mission, the unwanted pests have once again been controlled. So the smoke rises and we arrive to wipe the shadows off

the walls; bent-over hags praying, this one kid's slamming a dunk; all to plan, except we hear some squeals striking a nasty note with the rats' banquet festivities. It's these three girls without legs, not sure if they in heaven or hell." He blinked twice, sat up a millimetre.

"Now they must have been playing in a titanium hamster-wheel at the time 'cos they all three breathing, just missing their legs. Well, we Cleaners, we take our work very seriously and we've seen more Breathers than even I care to dream about. But remember, ordained by God, culling for utility – the cheeses love that, they know the rules but you might want to remind them – if the pests don't see it coming, if they don't have any time for bright tunnels, it's all kosher. Invested altruism right. But if they hurting, you gotta help despite your Cleaner reputation and the meagre fact that you've just dropped a large sack of death all over their nursery schools.

"So Ben flips them over, one by one, onto the stretchers. Until the last girl, through his crusted visor, he sees her face; this big-eyed *moholica* he calls them, down-syndrome girl with very bad teeth."

He made the face, squinted eyes and flared nostrils, Shocker piecemeal, embellished with shrunken t-rex hands and a shake of the chair (presumably symbolising the lack of legs).

"And then," he continued, "then she gives him a smile and Ben picks her up and he slaps her on his shoulder, the two prancing off into the ash-storm sunset. Adopts her *per se*," inverted commas and a wink. "And who knows what he might have wanted her for, but that's the last we ever see of Ben."

Songbird, eyes closed and slapping the bar, laughed in a pitch to nauseate the auditorily gifted. "Ben's got special taste," she said. "Love at first sight".

"Poetry," Chester huffed, but didn't bother smiling, and because something was grating his sense of calm, he took a second for some improvised thinking.

The more time passes the more it seems to speed up, he thought, the faster fish grow feet and thoughts universalise. And what seemed like aeons ago, in the industrial pharmaceutical district of Dalphiney, when the Belgian Bosmans clan would have safeguarded their blood, the flooding stream of history was already torrential.

Already then, although their name had rolled up in its consonants a stamped and sealed scroll of ancestry, the name's distance from the Homeland and the dead was growing. Pronunciations were localising. Like a satellite broken orbit. Then, in no time at all, the Bosmans found that what it meant to hold that family name had all to do with *Little Farmacia* and the people there, because the Homeland had become unrecognisable and, in turn, would not identify them.

In no time, their history had been erased and as a civilisation might wake up to science, they found themselves unaided by the past in self-definition. It was all on their shoulders. And what it meant to be a Bosmans changed: it meant pharmaceuticals and a long, thin, ridged nose, a long, high forehead and fair curly hair. And they fostered these traits, hoarded them jealously in the stacked rooms between 107th and 115th – the old caressing their grandchildren on birthdays, overwhelmed by teary-eyed pride, tracing the geometry of their nose-bridges with reverent fingers.

In the back of their minds they were constantly holding-fast, besieged by a serendipitous existence. They were resilient and determined, as if behind the walls of Masda, but for time, time and the claustrophobia of the young.

Meanwhile, the adjacent neighbourhood was feeling the pressure of Dalphiney's rising tide, the ocean of genealogy, bagpipes, bongos and tambourines against its ramparts, intent on equilibrium, pushing with the force of all the world's seduction.

They were described as 'Angels', with their oversized eyes the green of pears, and morish lips, perpetually moist and full, with their long lashes. They had small faces all fitted together, soft and cluttered. The men were beautiful and women divine, and they too would guard it, the 'Babies of *Liberta*'. The Babies were dark-skinned faerie darlings. The Babies dabbled in the witchcraft of heartbreak.

They had a power in their fragility, a meekness imprinted onto their features and could, with one fawn-like look, persuade you to gladly hand over your heart, to cut it out of your own chest. But under this unweaned veil, the Babies were crafty and wry, and had another mask that was dark and terrifyingly compelling, and it wasn't long before the Bosmans were in love, and the territorial rivalry between the bands was undercut by secret pledges whispered during midnight liaisons.

A cosmic mishap of circumstance.

At one historical cutting of the cheese or another, one Don Boudewijn Bosman became the community godfather. This man was, not uncoincidentally, also the overseeing manager of (+)-(S)-N-Methyl-3-(naphthalen-1-yloxy)-3-(thiophen-2-yl)propan-1-amine production – then the compound in most demand.

And when *Liberta*, where they once processed flowers, and *Little Farmacia* quietly merged, consolidating hereditary forces, unnoticed by all but the unnaturally longevous, thanks to the Don's prolific progenitorship, Bosmans became the name of paternal lineage. The Bosmans made babies of their own.

It was then that things started to get funny.

By now, Janitor was engaged in his alone time with the lady.

He had annoyed Chester with his little anecdote, and Songbird had even more so, not because of her show of mirth, but because of the ambivalence of its root.

Chester hated that she could stage such amusement, but that was fine. It was easy enough to detest the woman. The problem was a niggling fear that it might have actually been funny, that she might have actually succumbed to involuntary laughter. And what did that say about his past? What did that say about his esteem, about all Clowns? If the joke was really on them?

The problem with improvised thinking: it was forever taking you where you'd never been.

Chester concentrated on his beer and the next two, fielding idle chatter and group banter prudently, so it wouldn't turn on him.

Janitor returned looking pleased with himself, pulling sharply on the lower hem of his jacket.

He said, "All mine." Chester was next.

He strutted across to the vacant high-stool, assessing his intoxication *en route*. The coats of arms, novelty glasses, catatonic TVs, all the non-threatening debris were hallowed in fuzz, which he noticed while keeping his balance at the same time. Dead right.

She had her face averted, penning in what looked like a diary.

"Must have been an exciting night," said he, in a voice as deep as he was large. He handed her his card and straddled the stool.

Chester Bosmans.

Jester from legendary Bosmans descendancy.

"Easily the Funniest Fucker in the World"

(said by people he's met)

The business card-printer had taken liberties, displayed his lyrical flare by swapping 'Man' with 'Fucker', and ignoring the fucking note Chester had placed in his hand, showing perhaps that he could be comical too. All that initiative but not enough insight to replace 'funniest' with 'most tragic', as history would reveal really depended on how you chose to look at it.

She took the card gently – her fingers were slightly chubby, well fed, and matched the spread of her arse over the stool. She was no dove, more of a pigeon, a Renaissance girl; in her rounded face the shine of health. She eyed the thing, flipped it over – his number was on the back – and chucked it onto the puddled table.

“It’s been interesting,” she said, and smiled neutrally, and Chester glimpsed the ease of which her mouth could assume its show-piece.

“So. Chester,” she looked up, “what’s your song and dance?”

Janitor had put him off. He was irritated with the whole squalid scene and, yes, on second thought, liquored beyond even a Clown's limited tact.

“Nothing scripted,” he said and fished in his pocket for a fag. “Just naturally hysterical. In my genes they say.” He lit up and some smoke stung his large green eyes – lucky she wouldn't notice.

“So what you’re telling me is you *think* you’re funny?”

“Sometimes. Sometimes I’m funny. Sometimes I like to think so.”

“What, when you take off the glasses?”

“Even funnier. But you’re something quite serious,” he said, tapping the rims of his Wayfarers. “X-ray vision.”

His gaze traced down her length and back up in slow motion.

“Will you take them off then?” she said, sounding, by now, slightly desperate.

“Easy. Maybe later, one step at a time, hey lovely.”

She sighed, pained. “Juggling?” she said. “Magic tricks?”

“Been known to shoot strawberry-cheesecake out my dick.”

“I don’t think my client likes cheesecake.”

So it was a he, because all women like cheesecake, or a she, because the rep wasn't buying the dick angle. But, in any case, loaded, because this bird, she had an expensive sense of style.

The sliver of her blouse, visible between the flaps of her open jacket, was silky and spotless, woven in luscious red. Her earrings were gemmed and set in gold to match her bracelet. Obviously not a smutty type; said a lot about the client. Some types just wanted you to help them drool, with wise-cracks about gays or prostitutes or straights, to lube them up, then change the bib.

“Can do slap-stick,” Chester said, bradwurst finger jammed up his nose.

“How about cheery?”

Chester laughed. “Cheery? Who'd ever want anyone funnier than you?”

“*She*, God knows,” she said looking tired in the tipsy light, “doesn’t know what she wants and that’s why I’m in this shithole.”

“Maybe God knows *you* don’t know what you want and *that’s* why you’re in this glorious establishment.” This was not going well Chester assessed; change of tac. “Do you believe in love-at-first-sight?”

“You’re not funny.”

She looked worn out, jaded – who’d blame her – and beautiful in distress.

“I think you’re not fit to judge,” Chester said.

“And why is that?”

He shrugged, “No sense of humour.”

“You know what I think? I think you’re pathetic. The whole lot of you and your little jamboree. Life’s made a joke of you and this is your feeble attempt at revenge. I think you’re a bottom-feeder.”

“Is that what this is about? Are you into bottom feeding? You needn’t be ashamed--”

“You’re a fat unfunny bastard.”

“Miss ...” he said and waited. Gave a flourish with his hand.

After a few-seconds she looked up.

“Marlene.”

“Miss Marlene, if you’ll pardon me, that was a bit ambiguous.” He looked at her sternly and said (most seriously now Chester), “Are you trying to flirt with me?”

She put her diary and pen into her bag and stood up off the chair. She was taller than he had imagined, in her grey suit with a ghostly pink stripe vaguely detectable through its material, in her stumped heels, taller than Chester.

“You’re the last?” She drained the dregs of her white wine.

“I hope so Marley,” he said, wishing he could have met her eyes.

She made to leave.

“You forgot my card!”

She brushed past him, all in a rage, her outfit taut with long limbs. Chester instinctively swung his beer up out of her way, knocking his shades onto the floor. He bent, scrambling for them, rising abruptly, but she had turned and was facing him, and he could smell the semi-sweet on her breath. Already thrilled whistles were coming from the bar.

She had seen his eyes. She had seen his mishap of a face.

He seemed paralysed, hands by his sides, the glasses in the right, his eyes flinching. She just stared and there was so much offended compassion there. He felt like a boy again, surrounded by the future without a clue. It was too much. He lowered his head and pushed the glasses back through his curly hair to fit in place on his long, thin nose.

She bit her lip. “Chester, as charming as you are, I’m afraid my mind’s been made up for three hours now.”

“Who?” he said breathily, as if she’d just revealed who’d left him for dead on the floor.

She pointed, fifth from the left, at a man in green and yellow wind-breaker who was still peering into his beer.

“Torrie?! He’s a regular drunk! He's ablutophobic!”

“Well he had more wit than the rest of you combined. And he was more ...”

“Regular like?”

“Less of a freak.”

She had conviction, but her eyes were glazed with remorse.

“And you better tell that Janitor abomination to hold his tongue around here, unless he plans on making his life even more miserable.”

“You never know.”

“Fine,” said Marlene.

“Marley?”

She turned again, ready for anything, her mind one foot out the door.

“I can tell you the reason,” Chester said, paused.

She said nothing, did not move.

“I can tell you the reason we are all like this. I can tell you stories of this underworld, show you the magic here. I can show you how harmless we can be.”

She smiled simply, and what he would have given for the brilliance of the one coaxed out, to overwhelm her, by happiness.

“Marley?”

He would have waited all day for her to respond. Her fists shot to her hips and her head to the side and after a pause she rasped in resigned acknowledgement.

“Ja?”

“Do you believe in multiple-orgasms?”

8. Prescription Flat

The new flat was small. It was the size of their living room at Hoopoe Heights. The kitchen was on one side and mirrored on the other was the bathroom and a surprisingly capacious walk-in closet. The walls were custardy like old teeth.

The main space was cleaved almost to the midpoint by a hardboard partition, which barred each sleep area from the other, with a gap below the ceiling which could be peered over from a standing position on the bed.

Buddy Kelly had his futon assembled, the thin foam mattress unrolled on top. The bed was dressed in clean sheets and covered by the duck-down blanket in which he wrapped himself year-round like an escape-artist. In her cubicle, Catherine had a pine bed frame and an old, spring mattress which had belonged to her daughter, which had begun to croak of late, in protest of its burden.

The double bed had been sold. The bookshelf and its finger-browned assortment, the flatscreen, had all been passed into new hands. There remained her display cabinet cluttered with trinkets, which shimmered for attention under the milky central light, punting lies about their value. Most were of the roughest glass; beggarly pigs with conical trotters, soot-black Scotties prised out of wood. A large porcelain mug unbalanced by windmill in relief.

Atop were the five remaining picture frames. Faces smiling with inexcusable abandon, serving sentence for all time in their contentment, as if denying association with their owners' stumblings to unmeasured coffins.

The salesman wasn't there. He was missing. Buddy Kelly didn't know if his mother had some photos yet, in her trunk, the shattered wedding frame, maybe the ring that left a shackle burn of white around her finger. A letter or two consumed by long, carefree strings of ink, pecked with his cologne.

There was a picture there in a gilded frame, in which Buddy Kelly was smiling expansively, sitting in a little yellow chair in front of a cake which was topped with six barber-pole candles. His sister was in a high-chair, with that irredeemable toddler bemusement amidst her plump cheeks, her hands half-clapping, her tiny fingers interlocking, a cotton bonnet over her head like a pink sunrise. Naturally, the salesman had been behind the camera.

On the back of the main door were two metal hooks for hanging towels and on the right, as one stepped through the door, was the living room. Here, the bulbous, sun-bleached couch, the two striped armchairs, the glass-topped, mahogany table, a wrought iron lamp in the corner.

They would need a new microwave – theirs had been impractical for this place, made to fill space and gleam like a time-machine.

Looking around his new home, Buddy Kelly felt the oppressive weight of his circumstances. He felt he was owed more than this, with all their measly assets stuck on ancient planks between yellowing walls, and was overwhelmed for a single moment by the admission that it was a scrap. From birth to death. Winning or losing.

Buddy Kelly and his mother were settling down for their first meal in their new home. From the kitchen-side wall came the shrieks of a child who was expressing emphatic disagreement with the suggestion that he should get into the bath. Then a moment of stillness, followed by more barely suppressed cries.

“We didn't need such a big place anyway,” she said inspecting the floret of béchamel-broccoli on her fork, “just for me and my baby.”

She winked at him clumsily and batted her eyelids.

“This place is fine,” Buddy Kelly said. “Got your wooden floors.”

“It has potential, don't you think? Just needs some living in.”

He crossed a skinny leg over his knee. He thought: it has had plenty of living in. He wondered how many tenants had made sojourns here in their short lives. If they had arrived hopeful, left hopeful. “Some stuff on the walls,” he said.

“We can go to a market and find some undiscovered art. Or you could start painting again?”

Buddy Kelly, in his humble, doubting way, liked to think of himself as the artistic type – in that self-deprecating manner typical of the artist, he postulated, who kept to himself and had few friends. This profile was one she had never abstained from encouraging. He had done a few oil paintings in his time (which she insisted were spectacular) but not much for awhile. Although, he wrote frivolous poetry from time to time, and, even in his most rushed photographic attempts, no matter how half-baked the effort, he somehow managed to balance the tenets of light, depth and shape in the compositions.

They ate heartily, plates on their laps. It had been a long day.

“It's going to be wonderful,” said she, but it was too quiet in there, too small and neutral and bare. Buddy Kelly was unconvinced.

“You seen Tums lately?” he said, watching her carefully.

“I saw him last week.”

“And? They did the autopsy?”

“And he's a sweet man,” she said. “I think he was really trying for us, but I've discontinued his services. He still wants to see me, on a non-professional basis.”

“What a shmuck!” Buddy Kelly said, appalled. “I wonder how many husbands he fails to find, and then tries to get in with their wives.”

“*Please*, I won't see him again.”

He said, “What about Claire?”

She didn't drop her fork. She didn't drop the plate. She looked at him sadly. She hadn't forgotten.

“He asked if we had found a note. A suicide note. He asked if there was any previous indication that she might have been planning to kill herself.” She stared at the table top as she talked.

“Because the forensics ... ?”

“She wasn't raped or assaulted,” she said abruptly.

“But her things ... her wallet, her phone ... her ring?”

Buddy Kelly thought of the cordoned-off scene, that soggy patch of foliage, the slosh of leaves below the bank, the yellow tape slipped under rocks in a twisted rectangle like another length of refuse snared in the muck. The canvas bag. Onlookers in the dark like curious ghosts.

“The police have concluded that the two squatters had tried to help,” (she sounded like she was reading a news-prompter, several days into an earthquake), “The police say the ring came off when the vagrants were trying to move her. They say they were trying to find some identity documents, phone someone to help, because they were trying to help.”

“So where are they then?” Buddy Kelly asked. “The things?”

The investigation had been messy – “Very interesting circumstances, very interesting, indeed.” – and yet the constable's aspect had been sympathetic, yes, but coldly so, unphased, like he had seen it all before.

“They're gone, Buddy.”

So she was beyond denial. The whole ordeal had been drawn-out for so long, starting with the flash-bomb of media coverage during the first few days, the requests for interviews (which Buddy and Catherine had refused), but the whole ordeal had been there and finalised, lying in the canvas bag. It had been over just then. The newspapers lost interest the moment the case had been put to file, the police the moment the papers stopped caring. But Catherine hadn't been satisfied, hence the PI.

“So there's no crime. I just don't understand, I looked it up and that snake, its not meant to be lethal ... to humans.”

“There was a crime,” she said, but there was no anger in her voice.

“The pills? Pentobarbital?”

“The forensic pathologist told Tums that the venom aggravated the effects.”

“And the pills weren't prescribed.”

“No.”

“Was there a note?” Buddy asked, suddenly fearful for not knowing the answer.

She shook her head solemnly, “I wish there had been.”

“And Philip?”

“I haven't seen him. Have you?”

“I haven't.”

It was over *then*. It was over when she didn't come home, but now it had to be put to rest.

It had taken them a while to realise something had happened. Claire had been in the park for over an hour before Poppy Blane became suspicious, but Poppy would not go down to look for her. She eventually got hold of the university.

Claire had been staying with Catherine and Buddy because she had been embroiled in a fight with Philip, the details of which hadn't been discussed. The Kellys were assured that all she needed was a bit of time, the comforts of home, before she would divulge all, or, if not, that she would have worked it through on her own, returned to Philip with a hug and a kiss, the episode to be forgotten like any other lovers' tiff.

After a while they resumed their meal, eating in relative silence for a spell, each manipulating the food, combining it how they liked, looking around the apartment as if to remind themselves it was really theirs. From the wall came the cries of the child enraptured in tantrum, apparently now refusing to get out.

“Have you ever been out of this shithole city?” he said.

“I have.”

He encouraged her with an expectant nod.

“Once or twice,” she said. “They're all just the same. But this one's the grandest.”

“With dad?”

“Yes,” she said, her shoulders drooping slightly.

“Is that where he's gone?” said Buddy.

“I never knew where he went.” She looked tired.

“He didn't tell you?”

“They always had different names.”

They sat in the unobtrusive quiet, scooping salad dressing and defiant batter from the plates.

“It's a new start angel,” she said standing up. “We'll make it. I have a feeling.”

“Ja, me too. Needed to get out of that house.” He got up to stack the plates.

“Oh, Buddy,” she said, “a letter arrived for you the other day.”

“Letter?”

“An envelope. Remember those things?”

He stood rooted in place. “Is it from him?” he asked, his curiosity too keen to suppress.

She picked up the letter from where it was resting against the kettle. “How should I know,” she said, handing it to him. “I doubt it, cherub. In any case I didn't want to give it to you during the move.”

He turned his back to her and inspected the envelope, hunching over it, rotating it, leaning in closer as if its glossy face might be spotted with Winch's egg-sized fingerprints. Buddy's name was hand-written on the flimsy container, scrawled in black in the centre. There was no stamp, no address. It was an untraceable vessel, external to the sanctioned flowings of barcoded correspondence.

Buddy Kelly stashed it away by the bed – to deal with later.

He crowded his shoulders into the small, clay-tiled bathroom, which had a rusting chain dangling from the elevated cistern, a shower head hanging over the bath. He looked at his reflection, dabbed at his head's thin black covering. He had shaved it after she had died. His eyes drifted to the top corner of his vision, to the exigency waiting in his mind.

He was exhausted and he wondered if it was enough to let him sleep unaided, although he knew, in any case, the thought was irrelevant.

He undressed and showered, negotiating the right temperature with the unfamiliar taps and he felt a tingle of arousal as the water careened over the curves of his form. When he turned off the water, Catherine's arm was thrust in the steam holding a towel.

He took his pill, swallowed it slowly, relishing the fatuous act of self-immolation, entrusting the cold-comfort the pellet would deliver. The pills were his crutch now. One per night.

He had taken them from beside the empty bed the night his sister did not come home. They had been in an orange bottle on her bedside table, next to another orange bottle that had been empty.

The pills were poison and antidote. They sapped his soporific capacity, each a greedy watermelon seed. He was hooked on them now. His insomnia had been an incremental

dilapidation. Like a smoker turned laryngectomee, an eater stuck in her bedroom, he woke up one day to find things changed, that he could no longer sleep on his own. They afforded him five to six hours of hyper-saturated, canorous imaginings, maybe six on a good night. Otherwise interminable thinking. Is this how she had felt, night after night?

He placed his watch on the floor next to the bed and lay for a time listening to its ticking.

Outside it was quiet but not silent, never silent. Most things were at rest, machines and their operators, shop-clerks, elevators, but here and there railed a dopplered siren in crescendo, decrescendo, just like everywhere in Dalphiney, whooping as the curtains blinked red, as if from an over-clocked lighthouse. And the drone of distant traffic was always there, and the brown clamour from all the dogs and voices massing like revolution into a buffering mist that swamped true silence as if it were a sacred secret of the universe never to be known by man but in theory.

Around him the corners and faces of objects were polished by the soft light. The clothes piled on the chair, which resembled a cloaked figure engaged in espionage, the furniture, all these things emanated a scratchy, palpitating calm under the spell of the sleepers.

This was his new cocoon, and he smelt, beyond the laundered familiarity of his bedding, the wooded air, slightly stale and mothy, and thought he felt his mother's breath, reflected off the ceiling, brushing against his cheek.

On the ceiling he could discern sepia shapes, illuminated by the light seeping in from under the door and around the curtains. The splotches must have been from damp, and he gazed at them until they became caricatures of animals and wrinkled islands on old treasure maps and he paused and rewound his thoughts and realised they had become wayward and he must be on the verge of sleep.

He hugged his two thin pillows. He would slide the top one from side to side during the night like a harmonica (to dodge the patches of drool), and at intervals would lift and stretch each toe like ascending notes.

He curled up, pressed between the ceding foam and an anvil of air, crushed his lungs with ribs and knees and waited for the dreams to take him.

He thought of a girl. She laughed and said, that's not how you do it, and showed him how and laced her arms around his neck from behind him and kissed his head. She said thank you, thank you for saving my life and he kissed her body and she gasped, overcome by all the love that bustled within her for this boy. He was gentle but she knew he was strong and knew he was tortured and she looked at him with sad eyes and bit her lip and knew that he only suffered because he couldn't help caring more than he should. In this

way he drifted off, amidst a choppy-sea of private wishes, and his heart thumped harder, pumping fresh-spilt adrenaline through him, and in the darkness behind his eyes he relished the hope of this new place, and that this phantasmal beauty might find him here.

After midnight the outside clamour grew steadily as the dark wore on, and it sounded like the ocean against a beach with a sharp and deep shore-break. It grew; the ocean overflowing, grinding inland.

He awoke during the night, submerged in a dream. Winch was there. This time he had really come back.

Buddy Kelly had listened for the key aligning in the lock, for the clunk as the door swung open, and he had heard his footfalls on the scoured carpet, the clatter of keys coming to rest on the table, briefcase flumping on the floor. He had stepped more quietly unburdened, drifted to where Buddy heard a kiss, a blurred sets of murmurs, one voice high and lost through the open space and his low and penetrating.

He awoke and the letter was there, just where he left it, teetering on the fringe of his conscious mind. And the salesman had come back.

“Guess who’s home,” he said parading in to Buddy’s room, arms splayed as if in hot pursuit of a chicken, his collar open, jacket unbuttoned. “And do I have a bargain for *you*?”

He launched to enfold the boy in his musky embrace. He sat on the bed. Buddy Kelly was not quite able to hold the sureness in the great man’s eyes.

The envelope was unmarked but for his first name in the centre, hand-written in capital letters. Of course it had to be him. The envelope was untraceable.

“I got this just for my boy, it wasn’t easy, don’t just find these lying around. Been wanting to give it to you for quite some time.”

“Is it a new prototype?”

“No,” he laughed his eely laugh. “No, this is one of a kind.”

Winch drew back his suit sleeve and revealed a watch, a man’s watch, clad in mint gold which trapped beads of light like fireflies. It had a strap armoured in golden scales. Its face was a pearly-green, with splatterings of red among the crisp black numerals. It showed the date and a hairline hand purred in its seamless race through the hours.

Winch unclasped it from where it was bolted among hairs on his hefty wrist, lassoed it over Buddy Kelly’s hand, ran it all the way up by his elbow.

“You’ll grow into it soon enough.”

“That’s the real deal.”

“That thing won’t ever stop ticking, I can guarantee you that.”

Buddy Kelly picked up the letter.

He pried inwards for snapshots of the man's handwriting. He didn't know where exactly to search. There were some episodes, short silent movies, where he watched his father signing cheques from a jittery lens, eye-level with the pen, watched him tinkering with a crossword puzzle – she always wrote in the birthday cards. His signature was a scraggly nest, unhinged, skewed loops for the capitals, and Buddy Kelly caught flashes of reels of slanted letters, their bulk low on the line but the tips high reaching, 't's crossed near the bottom, hurriedly leaning; a graphologist's career case.

“Thanks dad.” Buddy Kelly hugged him, the watch scratching his arm.

“Anything for my main man.”

“It says water resistant to fifty metres.”

“I'm sure they were being conservative. You looking after your sister?”

He nodded. “Find some new winners?”

His father laughed, sitting on the bed, a laugh that was always unannounced, beamed from somewhere peculiar, somewhere secretive, as if he shared the joke with himself and no one else was entrusted to understand.

“Ever miss the feeling of lush green between your toes?”

Buddy Kelly thought for a moment. He was old enough to play along. “Why, yes. Yes, in fact, I do.”

Winch seemed to sigh. “Me, I don't. But some people do. Lots of people, you wouldn't imagine. So I'm dealing grass. *Wonder-Grass*. Grows in five days. Stays green all year round, even under frost or snow. It's practically a miracle buy. Three strains matted for that authentic, luxurious feel.”

Buddy Kelly chuckled excitedly. He could stare at his father when he set out on a demo pitch of one of his products, at his eyebrows hopping out of time, his cheeks stretching, his white smile flicking during pauses. He was so animated and Buddy Kelly couldn't, at that age, think of anyone who didn't immediately like the man upon meeting.

“Sounds too good to be true.”

“You would think, but in the modern day. I'm working on something bigger though. Don't tell your mother but if it works out we'll be living in one of those snob palaces in Redwood.”

He wouldn't tell her. They existed in disparate realms and he knew better than to try and bridge them. He was well-versed in the perils of the double-agent.

Winch stood up, swivelled on his heels. “Righto,” he said, before loping out of the room. “Got to say hi to your sister before she gets jealous. See you soon, my boy.”

It was a lottery dream. It took a few seconds for the certitude to dissipate, for Buddy Kelly to rebuke the gullibility of his unsupervised self; such a fool, so easily duped.

The writing was too spaced and neat. It was clearly not his hand and he felt emboldened in confirmation. It couldn't be from him.

He opened it. At the bottom corner of the page a few fine points were sparkling, like glitter but smaller and round, like atoms. Little atoms of gold. This is all that it said:

Dearest Buddy Kelly.

Come to Azania.

He had believed.

Maybe his father was charming him along, a true showman, but Buddy Kelly had believed it was out there. He had believed that the streets of some place were coated in gold and no one had noticed, with diamonds sprinkled in the sugar pot, that the millionaire deal was out there.

But as it turned out, it wasn't the *Wonder-Grass*. Had he unearthed it since, Buddy was curious to know. But with the cynicism of age he'd let the suspicion sneak in, the spiderbite of disillusionment, that perhaps Winch was naïve or some flavour of psychotic, as inept in mind as he was a father and husband, perhaps, that he was merely a charlatan.

This would have been easier to deny if he hadn't left them, because Winch was a fire-storm of character, his charm almost impossible to resist.

10. An Auspicious Thing

You had to keep your sense of humour around here.

Ja, just laugh it off. Laugh it off was the magic phrase.

Loaf had done a stint as a carguard and if you really knew Loaf (like only Rose really did), you would have known that he was no *skabenga*.

You would have know that, okay sure, he was just a little flesh and a little stack of bones underneath, not exactly intimidating, but he wasn't like some of them, who called their buddies over to come throw a rock through your window while you were off with your girl at the movies, so they could steal your radio and maybe even the whole car.

Loaf would say, "I'm you're watch-dog, boss. I am the owner now, for a little while," like he had overheard big Alain say. They liked that.

He said: "Just for a while I am the owner. Until you come back, boss."

But he had fallen asleep, and ja, maybe it was because he had been smoking some stuff out of newspaper but he hadn't meant to at all. And the guy had come out from the movies with his pretty girl under his arm and Loaf was hiding behind the dustbin (and he even had on one of those reflective yellow jackets) but the guy couldn't see him crouched with his fingers gripping the black liner of the bin.

And this guy had been pissed off when he saw the brick on the backseat, the cords and wires like entrails spilling from the dash, major pissed off, but she had jumped up and given him a kiss, just before they drove away, a sweet kiss on the lips and she had said, "Chill out, babe." She said, "Just laugh it off."

Loaf never went back to the carguard thing. Besides, the other guys were mostly big like Alain and loosely (in that they sometimes said your cars were theirs), loosely, but also terrifyingly territorial.

But he had laughed that off and things were going well with this philosophy applied to life, like if you were hungry, just laugh it off until you were *really* hungry, until your belly was complaining loudly, and by then something would have come your way without you worrying too much about it.

And then one day, when he had been milling around without purpose or concern, he found the sketchpad.

It was lying just off one of the streets along his foraging path, by the steps of an old pillared building. These steps he had passed many times before. But there had never been

anything of interest there, except for the few ageing structures, columned also, triangular roofed, that were libraries and studios, and a boxy theatre or two and the whimsical throng of bohemian youths and their crazy outfits which together made up one of the many art campuses of the inner city. Nothing too interesting; a few squirrels zipping between things.

He had picked it up, quite innocently, and glanced around to see if anyone was watching. Nobody but a twitchy nosed squirrel. So he had flipped through the course white leaves. And he felt excited, really excited, because this was an auspicious thing indeed, a sign that the *status quo* for skinny old Loaf was about to change.

For you see, when he picked it up he even tipped his threadbare beret – it was a natural thing to do. He even tipped his corduroy beret.

Now, why should he be wearing a beret and then find an artist's book?

This hat (and because he had neither muscle nor fat spare down the length of his skeleton) was the reason he had come to be named Loaf. It was 'Half-Loaf', actually, but he preferred the shortened version. That's Loaf, as in French loaf, and not, he was convinced, owing anything to do with the meths. And his family name; what was a family name without a family. Laugh it off, hey.

The matte white pages had all been blank but for one.

This single page had a strange, feathery grey sketch, like the outlines of a head looking forward, the rudimentary shapes which make up the proportioned face. It had ovals, and triangle where the nose would be, a void the length of an eye between the eyes and between each eye and the ears, and the main shape was divided into thirds. These were the fundamentals from art school 101 (it even said that on the cover of the pad, 'ART101').

And with his new philosophy, Loaf was initially a bit apprehensive to get excited about this discovery, but it bolstered a once active pride in his ever resourceful abilities; gave him a strong shot of hope, a reason to believe that things might change.

Loaf had promptly made his way to the stationery store on Peach Street, where he emptied his pocket of that night's commodities budget for a pencil.

The object had since, with its lovely, thick sheets, over and above the rain and surprises of the street, become the primary stake struck into his shaky peace of mind. Between the loftiest hope and hopeless misery his mood swung like an unbalanced pendulum, and he suddenly wasn't as casual about fate as before, as 'chilled-out'. This was the artist's predicament, he imagined, to match his beret.

This was two months ago.

Loaf now occupied his bench. Its full length was clearly reserved for his practising, for the scant miscellanies of his trade: the sharpener, bottle-opener, browning prestik nugget (amassed from many different colours from many different walls, with bits of paper still in it); his pencil-bag; okay, he could admit it was stuffed with some newspaper for bulk; a cheap plastic click-pen and a pencil stump with a slanted eraser on the end.

These things, to you, might look cheap and unimportant. To Loaf, they were the keystones of this thing, this dream he had let hook into his throat. That was dragging him along.

With one skimpy jeaned leg balanced across the other, and his hands occupied by the pad and a glass of sultry red, he was just warming up for his next big customer. It was, thankfully, still the hot time in the city, although he could sense it was getting cooler fast, but there was yet awhile before the dreadful cold time when it might rain or it might not, but neither eventuality could speak for the great tidal waves of scraping cold.

Loaf had his wooden bench on the balcony of Sliver, overlooking the unholy night theatrics of Peach, a place where he had been given permission to come and draw by the big-shouldered barman. It was a hotspot where *they* liked to come and view it all and puff out their smoke and laugh, the groomed and varied young, the ones he couldn't understand at all, with their disposable money, who liked to come and dispose of it here, friendly more often than hostile, and then to leave, away to infinite warm and padlocked places.

It was dark but still early; a Friday, the ballooning rumpus from narrow Peach confirmed. It was a good time.

Already there was a couple, just sat down on the opposite bench, their feet propped up on the stain-mosaicked table between them and Loaf, and there was yet space for a clear view between them, like across a boardroom table, yet space for a clear statement of intent.

Loaf raised his glass showily, swankily, like a regular artist. He smiled deeply as was his way, his small eyes playful and shimmery, because he was happy and because he would communicate his passivity. The man nodded back, smiled, elbowed the girl slouched to his left who had the straw from her bitch-pop at her lips.

His face would do, Loaf thought. His hair was worrying though: longish, just above the shoulder, that was fine, but only slightly curly, minutely puffed and disorderly, with long strands bowing upwards, like not greasy but with a touch of frizz. The face was, however, well suited, not perfect but then he'd never found one that was. This oke had cool-

coloured eyes, water-coloured eyes, pointy nose, medium lips, not like Loaf's. Not like Loaf's at all.

Loaf was still smiling – he was like that if you knew him like Rose did: happy-go-lucky.

Loaf raised his thin eyebrows and nodded to his pad and then across to the man and the man nodded back and the woman nodded amicably and so it began and neither said a word but the mootable contract was conceived. That hair though.

He tipped his beret and fished out his original pencil from behind his left ear by the tattoo – four thick parallel lines – which laddered down his neck.

It had been just short on a month since his first occupational purchase. The instrument had been a long 2B, a naïvely wrong choice, but how beautifully slender it was, with its long hexagonal shaft, with its violent black spurts that were like pearls of lead in Loaf's blood.

He clasped this pencil, now slightly shrunken, between his two longest fingers as one might a half-done cigarette, so that it pointed downwards firmly, diagonally across the stem of his glass of red, resting against his thumb, and he proceeded to whirl his hand over the sketchpad eased in front of his face, as if it were a conductor's baton or spluttering sparkler, as if moved by a puppeteer's rod – the creative spirit, that was – all the while not spilling a drop.

He tilted his head to the side, a curious bird, tilted the pad, popped his head over the top.

Loaf was still smiling and raised his glass again to the subject who seemed barely interested, who was nonchalantly toying with his girl. Loaf waved his wand at him, smiled, raised his glass jazzily, aloof, but he hoped he did not come across too necessitous, he hoped they couldn't see that because they sometimes scared very easily.

Seven open bulbs of various colours hung along the floral, wrought-iron feature bolted to the top edge of the balcony roof, and the subject's face had a pink sheen that was like Rose's perfectly pink tongue, and his eyes were a little wet, that circle of white on the pupil, like Rose's healthy nose. His hair was not right, but his face was not like Loaf's.

Then from the open doorway, just to the side of his bench, came another two of them, first this guy then his outstretched arm like a tow-strap with his girl attached, and Loaf looked at the guy and his smile shrank away and he tilted his head to look at the pad.

Loaf looked at the grey picture there, at the only portrait of a young man on the only page of his artist's book that had ever been brushed by a pencil tip. This was the modified ovals and triangle from the original sketch he had found on that portentous day, layered time and again by small pieces, ever so lightly, ever so bashfully, of peoples' faces. Sharp

noses, fine straight hair, eyes the colours of lakes. Them, who smiled back but never paid. And the portrait had come so far but they never paid.

Loaf thought the amalgamation was good. Was it good? It looked like that man sitting across the table lounging with his girl and his beer, who was bold and tender with everything all sorted out. But it was more like the guy who just walked in. The nose was identical, and the eyes, and the hair. Loaf's tentative composite in the flesh. He hadn't sold any, but this guy, he *had* to see this picture. But the problem was, he hadn't seen Loaf wave his wand at him.

"It's good man," the newcomer said. "It's good, keep going".

Loaf's lips might have widened if they had been able. He nodded enthusiastically and raised his thin eyebrows and the pad and his wine, smiling like a mime.

"Ja, keep going, keep doing *that* guy," the guy said, pointing his brown bottle at the original subject, who was at this point completely oblivious, nudging his clean hair into the giggling woman's spongy arm.

But it was meant for this new guy. Loaf turned to his wine, sought the gaze of the man across the way, glanced back to the other perplexed, pleading now - he couldn't help it.

"Listen Rembrandt," the newcomer said, as if he was *moorse* pissed off at nothing, "don't look at me again. You hear me?"

Loaf's smile shrivelled away to nothing for his was a hard life, an expanse of years blistered daily by loathsome looks like this, from this guy. That tone.

Ones like this one who were so angry, so angry with Loaf, he had laughed them off before, he had laughed them off like he laughed off the smell of the begrimed clothes he woke up in every morning. Every morning in a different place, the foul smell of his body underneath, the itching smeared all across his skin, the long nails on his toes that stabbed out from the tears in his leather shoes, these holes through which the rain seeped in to scale and crack and make raw his feet, so that on some days it was impossible to walk with ... what? With dignity? Dignity? Don't make me laugh! Loaf had never heard of that word.

And even the friendly ones who paused for a moment, who stopped to sigh and flip open their wallets and dig through the front pouches, who had them filled with what? With silver coins! When he had not even done their portrait, but just shaken a can with one copper in it, these pouches on their fat black wallets were filled with the big silver coins, but they only gave him cents. Cents! And they waited for him to say thank you, and he did, because he had laughed it all off before.

When he vowed never to drink the purple stuff again, even through a half-loaf, when tonight he had spent all those cents for a glass of wine, all those cents and some more he had made digging in the rubbish for unbroken bottles to take in for deposit, because artists' drink red wine, and when they ordered him not to look at them, he had laughed it off.

When he thought he might like girls, girls like these pretty ones with their smooth skin and lipstick, but he had only ever been with boys, when that one bitter night he had curled up to a shivering *bruk* sleeping on a pavement, when she hadn't snarled at him so he could curl around the mangy fur of her knobbed spine and he saw her bloated teats and called her Rose, when a third of his body, his entire right side was covered in burns, deep, gelatinous, painful burns, like those sachets of liquid soap from hotels he had found in the bins – that is what his burns were like when he pushed them with his nails – he had laughed it off. And he had laughed it off when he woke up on fire that one night he had blacked out with some others in that stretch of veld between the highway and the treatment plant, when the others didn't wake him and Rose had run away.

Loaf and his meths, you'd have to have a sense of humour around here, hey. Loaf and his meths.

Loaf threw the pad off the balcony. He threw the stupid pencil off the balcony.

On his way out, away to laugh it off with some of the purple stuff, he passed some band setting up on the stage who didn't seem to notice him, passed the bigshot barman who didn't notice either, went down the stairs, passed another group of them, five of them on their way up and he bumped into one of them, big lips like Loaf, ovals and a triangle like Loaf.

And this guy who looked like Loaf, said, “You alright, man?” He said, “Is this yours?”

“Don't look at me again,” Loaf said. “You hear me?”

And the chattering of birds, would you believe?

Buddy Kelly lay awake. He lay on his side. He floated through a brew of consciousness half his own. He was resigned to its wayward adventure, its spastic teleportations. It was made up of the many ends of many dreams, one next to another, pegged onto string like photos in a darkroom.

Buddy Kelly then felt it again: a dull, restless feeling behind his forehead, as if a tiny worm had burrowed through his brow and was now living inside his skull.

Was it guilt? This steady pulse? The guilt that Earls had descried?

Buddy Kelly was, in this way, like the amnesiac on death row: the cause of his overarching situation eluded him. The memory skipped out of gaze like the figure-skating myodesopsia he knew so well, whose presence he felt, even concealed in front of life's busy tableau. He closed his eyes, let the squiggles cavort, squirm out of range, so thrilled were they on the monochrome.

What had Buddy done?

Whatever it had been – if it was, indeed, more than a psychological mistake – he seemed to be the primary target within a grand operation of retribution, with the subtle mechanisms of fate at the disposal of his pursuers, who could orchestrate coincidence, who would always be around and waiting where he happened to be; this, in the majority of his lucid dreams. Those mismatched flashes, that string of textured feelings, with cloaked eyes pasted in their backgrounds.

He listened to Dalphiney dawn. He listened to its citizens fighting nightmares, breathing in unison the hum and shudder of a half-dreaming city. They both longed for more rest.

Buddy Kelly heard his watch. He tried to ignore the regularity of its ticking. Not much else in the city made such jarringly metronomic sounds.

Indeed, it was by the shrieking of tires, the desperation applied, the latency; the number of sirens slapping each other in the air, that Buddy knew the exact day of the week. It was by the conscientiousness of arguments, the volume of televisions, the promiscuous thumpings. The sounds of people living, clustered together like frog-spawn in a blackened lake. It was by the gun-shots, by the hymns of homeless voices bled with sachet-whiskey, that Buddy Kelly knew the exact hour of the night.

And a plethora of birds, would you believe, roosting on the ledges chipped from buildings, on roofs, among the branchlets splayed and hungry from the millions of trees which dotted the streets like an endless string of Morse-code. They sang their music in relay. They bellowed out patterns, quaint and shrill. The ibis and its copycats squawking, the weavers' rodent-like squeals. And there were surprisingly many of them, so that, by the first suggestion of sunshine, a discordant collaboration, like a woodwind band dropped on a rusty trampoline, greeted the morning with a defiant vow of survival.

And would you believe the sun still came to Dalphiney? There it wormed across the curtained rectangle in the flat, still to spew its acrid gold across the steel and glass brazed grid of streets and roads and the scattered poor in between; the dead and the fastly dying; the trees drinking it up like stray dogs drinking yellow vomit. Would you believe the dawn still broke of its own accord, was yet beyond supplication?

As Buddy watched his world light up, discerning through his eyelids that it was undeniably day, the shock of it made him sneeze.

It was Buddy Kelly's exhausted state that had hollowed his cheeks, framed his mesmeric eyes in shadow, paled his complexion, accentuated his already sensual lips, pulled the skin taut across his triangular jaw, across his collarbones, all to the effect that he was regarded as a markedly handsome young man by people on the street (if somewhat stylised, somewhat cubist). All to the effect that he was respected for his fashionistic martyrdom and thus, to the degree that people commonly targeted his face in a crowd, smiled or jeered or nodded at his ghoulish eyes, his sense of freakishness was amplified, and he, deprived further of sleep.

The alarm.

Everyone must work or it'll all fall apart, so they say, or you'll become a bum and laze your life away because opportunity comes to those who work.

Buddy Kelly was already awake, yet every part of his body urged him to roll over and sneak back to wallow in dreams. But it was the beginning of another week, and so he sprung off his bed.

He felt the cool planks against his bare feet – there was a chill in the early mornings, even in summer. He looked around the place, looked up at the muddy patches on the ceiling which had morphed into all manner of beast the night before. They had mustard-yellow halos and he traced a line of brown from one to where it cracked the wall into unleavened collars of flapping paint.

He slipped his watch up his arm, a quarter way to the elbow, before folding over the clasp. He pricked an egg and boiled it for six minutes and made toast and put on his midnight blue suit.

Outside cars were throttling past and he heard the heavy fall of a hammer or pick in the distance interspersed with bars of rest.

He opened the curtains and the hem of the sky glowed white and he whispered goodbye to his mother and left, straightening his back, listening to the heavy knock of his thick-soled shoes on the stairs, the clicking from the studs fixed to the soles, skipping some steps on his way down.

Buddy Kelly caught the receptionist's eye as he strolled past on the way to the door, greeted him. Michael regarded him censoriously over his thin-rimmed glasses.

He stepped into the rhythm of the morning commuters.

There were people in suits with briefcases, others jogging in neon shorts. There were delivery bikes – 'kamikazes' as they were known around Dalphiney – with oversized tin-trunks over the back wheel, swooping here and there between androgynous cars. And there were children in dishevelled uniforms, in little round-peaked hats, bumbling along, tethered to familiar hands, and these people were all making their way somewhere, all absorbed in the prospect of those places (and the poor, the abject, sprayed around like graffiti), all self-contained.

He was secretly glad that, although surrounded by a million people at any one time, no intimacy was ever forced upon him. He was glad that interactions were, by unspoken agreement, transactional and dry, and that, like noticing the stroked lines down the middle of a habitually travelled highway, eye-contact rarely disclosed any interest.

Everyone was endlessly occupied: busy plotting, busy relaxing. Such was the way he valued the urban circulatory system. Although, he was impelled to wonder from time to time, who was he passing by, how many could he love, with his senses so righteously impaired?

Buddy Kelly strolled on down the street, between ranks of towers, and he joined with everybody else as they spilled like marbles down the staircased drain of Umzimbeet Station.

He arrived in no time on the underway.

He worked at the epicentre of Dalphiney, where the building were inconceivably built by man. They stood defiant of the water and wind that lashed from the sky, whose territory they encroached on ever more like stalactites on a frozen ocean. Most were glazed and reflected the sunlight, repainting the long-toothed cityscape and all the

structures and foliage intermeshed across their shimmering faces. And the rounded ones distorted the scene on their trunks as if mocking the ease of light's conception, in turn looking out over their own kind sprawling for kilometres and diminishing discreetly, with people like living dirt in every pavement crack, until it must have ended, but Buddy Kelly couldn't imagine how.

12. Further Than The Eye Can See

The ancient history was there to be read. Somewhere in the agerings of the stones it lay waiting to be transcribed. Somewhere nestled in the bedrock lay flecks of flashed time.

These stones were covered by hard slabs which were covered in turn by an impossible labyrinth of pipes and tunnels, for surging waste and current and transporting the public, and even the soil in which the countless trees were planted, their roots fingering at their concrete frames, was somehow foreign to the native place of nature that once existed here before the irreparable detonation of man. The earth was capped in hardness, the gold juiced from its ore crib, and from this grey carapace grew the tremendous towers of the city, those innumerable iron-fillings raised to the magnetic sky.

The history was still buried there; would always be. Come a future of orbiting dust-rings, the history would be there. But who needed to exhume it anymore? Who had the time to make their fascination with the past a habit? To derive some unquantifiable satisfaction from exposing its far-flung stories?

The present was peeling to the future more furiously than ever before. And the people of Dalphiney pined for the future, they craved it with a revolting lust. They wanted to pull away from the past because in the past there was only death, and they had come to lose patience with death's tyrannical rule.

At the Dalphiney's core, the UP Houses stood clustered together.

The tallest was crafted to resemble a medieval belfry. It had a monstrous openwork parapet, where helicopters would hover and daintily land, adorned with fern-like spikes. The other three government highrises were like turret bodyguards, cosied up beside it.

The smallest building was where Buddy Kelly worked. It was shaped like a church bell stretched lanky, clad in silver fishnet. He emerged from the dim of the underway station a short walk from its entrance and the sun was threatening a fierce day.

He walked the short strip of pavement, nodded to the decorative guards standing sentinel by the doors. These men were at ease, staring outward blindly, and would, in a few hours, be forced to break ranks to wipe the sweat from their brows.

Buddy Kelly stopped outside the building to check the time; for future planning; in order that he might, in the coming months, remain a few minutes longer in bed.

It was at this point that his near-average life interacted with a small changing force which would metamorphose his fate, although he did not realise it then, cloaked in ordinariness as the interaction was to be.

This catalytic force took the form of a tautly fat man, who was wearing large shades and a red, open-collared shirt, who already had dark wet ovals under his arms. This man had a densely stubbled curved jaw. He had a shallow cleft in the middle of his chin, and a large, thin nose which was slightly upturned – so one could see the curly hairs dangling out of his nostrils. This man stopped walking to ask Buddy the time.

Curiously, this character (who Buddy Kelly thought resembled the fat Blue's Brother) had paused in order to pose the same question which Buddy Kelly had, only five seconds earlier (when he pulled up his sleeve and glanced at his watch), endeavoured to answer.

“Excuse me,” the Blue's Brother said in a voice that was husky, as if unused since the day before, “do you have the time?”

Buddy Kelly was suddenly reticent to look again, because he really should have known the answer by now (give or take a few seconds), but he had completely forgotten. Instead of attempting to decipher the hands again, he stuck out his arm, more timidly than irritably, wearing his surprised face, for the large man to see for himself.

“There,” Buddy said, in a poor rendition of feigned annoyance.

The fat man politely grabbed Buddy Kelly's wrist with both hands, which seemed a natural enough thing to do – he might have suffered from short-sightedness for all Buddy Kelly knew, and his focal point happened to be shaking around ever so slightly.

“Ah,” he said.

“Just as you thought?” asked Buddy Kelly.

“Yes ... actually, more or less in the vicinity of the daylight hours.”

Buddy Kelly was quite relaxed. He was enjoying this asinine conversation, and, boosted by an unexplained flush of merriment, said, “I normally look up there for that.”

He pointed upwards, to where the sun might have been but for the buildings and a large flat cloud looming in front of it.

The stranger directed his face to Buddy, turned it to the side as a dog might, not understanding what its human had said.

Buddy Kelly muffled some half-word out because he was slightly confused. Perhaps the stocky man had missed the humour in his comment (which on reflection was rather encrypted), for he was now looking at Buddy quite sternly, with nothing impending to say.

Flee, thought Buddy Kelly. He turned and headed for the large glass doors of the building's entrance.

"I like your watch," the other said, following.

Buddy Kelly stopped and turned and looked at him once more and there he saw it, although half occluded by the shades, he saw there an incarnation of innocuous joy, Chester's particular layout of puffy-cheeked, white-toothed bait.

This smile, that Chester Bosmans was proud to exhibit, happened to be the mechanism by which the large man quite regularly expedited the voluntary parting of naked legs (an act which reinforced the potency of the next smile), for Chester liked nothing in the world more than what rested clammed up inside.

On second thought, Buddy mused, hijackers had been known to say, "I like your car," or to think it first, depending on their style and motives – some wouldn't like it but would steal it anyway.

"I like it, too," Buddy Kelly said softly, the exchange suddenly reminiscent of the position-establishing introduction to preschool fights over lego blocks, which generally terminated in tears.

Chester was not the most attuned person when it came to gauging the outward manifestation of others' thoughts, but he sensed Buddy Kelly was a sensitive type, and in his own improvisational way, aspired to put him at ease.

"Listen man, thanks for the time. I like your watch because it is gold and has a giant green face for fuck's sake. Not going to molest you with your watch on."

Buddy Kelly felt strangely relieved, and Chester's ostentation brought to the surface, often later regretted, a sample of the former's suave repartee. "Nor with it off," he said.

Chester laughed. "Man, you're going to get yourself used as a sex prop if you talk like that."

Buddy Kelly thought it time to change the subject. "You work in here?"

"No," said Chester, improvising, "but I do spend a lot of time farting into the ergonomic chairs."

One of the guards failed to stifle a laugh.

"You?"

"Same. I'm on forty-three."

"No! Really? Me too. Listen, I'll catch you 'round. Just off for some coffee. Thanks again."

Buddy Kelly then made his way rapidly into the foyer and summoned an elevator with his thumb-print. He stepped inside, stood staring at the doors, his heart racing, until they

opened on the forty-third floor, where he stepped out and clocked in, again with his thumb.

He entered the hall that was full of desks and chairs and monitors relegated to their cubicles, just on time.

There was a deep hum from all the computers and the air-conditioners wrestling the heat these machines emitted, and there were the sounds of mice clicking, muted chatter, his co-workers sitting and standing, rolling on their chairs and slurping from mugs.

He found his place and said hello to those immediately around him. He commenced the day's work, which he didn't mind doing, slumped comfortably in the calalily chair. His job (as he described it in response to inquiry from others) comprised of searching for irregularities in blooming patches of pixelated mould on the screen. Herding electrons with a stick.

He liked the competition of this job, the challenge of sourcing the identified anomalies. He enjoyed tracking them back to a stray digit or irregular pattern, and correcting and balancing the simulations. He liked that the systems were too organic for computers of the day to handle – for those intricate machines that were still insect brains, which the world would surely end without – or else, why would he be there? Why else could he outclass those around him?

The morning passed quickly and when he stepped into the elevator at noon, heading down to buy some lunch, he caught the eye of the man from before.

Buddy noticed his plump cheeks, and his lush pancreatic eyebrows poking over the plastic rims of his shades like hairy caterpillars, which he now raised at Buddy Kelly.

The big man, although standing in his natural pose, seemed to have all his weight slumped heftily on his Buddha belly. Buddy Kelly nodded reflexively and turned his back on him to stare at the doors again, because there was a woman in the silver vessel with them. The elevator purred considerably.

“Hey,” the fat man whispered theatrically. “Hey!”

Buddy Kelly turned his head sharply, suspiciously. Thankfully he was absolved from responding immediately as the elevator stopped, dinged, and the woman stepped out. Buddy Kelly pushed the 'close-door' button more than once. It was now just the two of them.

“Before you ask,” Buddy Kelly said, “it's lunch time. You should really get yourself a watch.”

“Nah.” He patted his fleshy pouch, “I know when it's a meal time. Forty-three, hey? I've seen you there. Keeping to yourself.”

Buddy Kelly turned to face him, “It’s my special skill,” he said, surprised by his readiness to face that allegation.

“You ever been to the top?” Chester said, his voice playful.

“I don't think we're allowed.”

“That’s what they want you to think, eh?”

“You been up there?”

“Nah, I’m a forty-third like you. Don’t you look around ever? Raise your head? We’re afloat on a sea of pretty faces, you know.”

The elevator dinged as they reached the ground floor.

“Hey, hold on,” Chester said, “Okay, you’ve got to step out.”

They both stepped out into the foyer – Buddy Kelly was planning on it anyway.

“Okay, now hold on a second,” Chester said.

The fat man looked around. He stuck a hand into his trouser pocket and took out a small object which he pressed against the lift's sensor. The doors opened again and just then the big man snapped his arms around Buddy Kelly and lifted him into the air, stepping back inside and swinging the scrawny man over the threshold all in one movement. Chester pushed the top button, with Buddy lining his oval gut, Buddy's temple pressed against his blubbered sternum.

Buddy Kelly was caught in that paralysis when time slows and the mind gradually states the naked fact of menace, that incredulous moment before fight or flight, the one a civilised man should never have to suffer, but by the end of it he was inside the tireless box and the doors were shut. Buddy Kelly enlarged, pushing the big man off him.

“What the hell?” Buddy said, resisting the urge to brush himself down.

“Okay, settle down. You need to eat more, man.”

“Ja, that’s what I was going – *Christ!*”

“Look. It's got pressure pads in the floor,” he said pointing at the pimpled mat. He proffered his hand. “Chester.”

Buddy Kelly regarded the chubby thing and cast its owner a wary look.

“Hey come on,” Chester said. “Not many are lucky enough to get the bear hug first time.”

He smiled and his right eyebrow popped up above his glasses' thick frame, as if connected to the crook of his lips by a mischievous thread. Buddy took his hand (though he knew his own to be moist).

“Buddy Kelly.”

“Buddy Kelly,” he said, “let’s go dine on the roof. When I saw you on the street this morning, I don’t know why, but you stuck in my mind, probably cause I’ve seen you on forty-three but there’s something else. You’ve got a distinctive look.”

Buddy Kelly eyed him sceptically.

“Like you’re a shy type, but you’re not shy are you?”

“I guess. I don’t know.”

“Ja, that’s the thing with you.”

The elevator dinged and the doors opened to a polished landscape of pearl tiles and pink-bled marble pillars, and there were palm trees behind the steel balustrade which had shafts like triangular totem poles, the trees growing amongst tiny, misty pebbles, the sun bathed in the polarised sunshine from overhead.

Above the elevator doors, red lines showed that they were on the 90th storey. The glass dome curved in an egg-shape and hanging below the apex was a silver man, with glinting muscles, extending a bow.

“Life’s good at the top,” Chester said.

“Apparently,” said Buddy Kelly looking around, distracted by the splendour of the environment.

“This upsets me deeply,” said Chester.

They strolled out into the foyer. There were many cafeterias scattered around, with signs encasing their menus, and in the centre, between two palm gardens, was an arrangement of polished brass tables and chairs, flanked by a buffet.

“Ever had freshwater dolphin?” Chester said as they wafted unseen through the black suits and skirts like souls on their first tour-day through purgatory.

Buddy Kelly was invigorated. He was suddenly stung by a wish to eat here everyday, but legitimately, to be greeted by name with buoyant smiles from the servers in their sharp paper hats and their pink waist coats (which matched the décor’s trimmings), to suck on a cigar whilst humouring negligent woes.

“I’ve never had regular dolphin,” Buddy said.

Chester gave a backfire laugh.

“Have you?” Buddy asked.

“Never seen the tricky things. I like to see things living before I take bits of them into my mouth,” said Chester, trying the smut angle.

“You ever seen a regular cow?”

Chester looked up to the dome evasively.

“A pig?”

“All the time,” he said. He took Buddy Kelly’s arm and spoke from a ventriloquist mouth, “Better stick to the buffet.”

The sun, softened by the tinted panels, assumed a flawless orange circle overhead, dropping cross-hatched shadows about the noontime murmur of the foyer. There were double-doors with reflected frescos along the ceramic walls. These were conference rooms, rest-rooms, an office or two, and by where the transparent panes rose to the east, shelling the conditioned air and people in, was another door with a green light centred above it.

The two stood in the buffet queue, behind a bald man who had dandruff speckled amongst the metallic glitter of his Lurex coat. Buddy Kelly felt inwardly jumpy, as if he were an outlaw. Chester, in front, already had a tray.

They were dished slices of steaming pork and creamed spinach and other concoctions all auteurist in their aroma and hue of spice. Chester sidled up some red-wine asado beef to his pork. The waist-coated pair behind the pitted table flashed them quick and meaningless smiles, as if to assure the feeders that they were not yet about to break, that they were not yet reduced to tears of boredom, of whatever travesty their tiny lives manifested.

Chester stood aside and when Buddy Kelly had finished picking, he indicated the perimeter door with a nod of his head, “I guess they’re used to suspicious types. Notice the creepy in all these people?”

“You want to go out there?” Buddy Kelly said, sweeping his gaze across the surrounding heap of upright grey and green and glass, like an aquarium reef of crude isometric coral, rooted hundreds of metres below.

“Clearly. What, you scared of heights as well as people?”

Buddy Kelly shook his head dubiously and they took their trays out onto the encircling balcony, which was cordoned off with the same totem-design balustrade as inside. They made their way to a fixed brass table hugging the glass, Buddy Kelly squinting in the brightness.

“What is that feeling like you really want to jump?” Buddy Kelly said.

“That’s called suicidal.”

“Vertigo,” he said obviously.

“It’s ‘cause we evolved from pigeons.”

The matter-of-fact way Chester said this caused Buddy Kelly to snigger; almost a giggle.

“It's true,” Chester continued, “We have similar genomes and that. Think about it. They're everywhere just like us,” he counted the evidence on his hand, starting with the pinky. “They eat and fuck and shit all day. They smell sometimes.”

“Carry disease.”

“Just like us,” he paused to look down and fork some steak. “Just like those fucking roaches. The other day, I caught a monster in the kitchen. I come down at like three, for some cheese or something, and this thing the size of a baby ostrich head is sitting on a dirty plate, just staring at me, you know, with those little black eyes,” his forehead ruffled in terror. “So I grab the spatula and open the cupboard where all the cleaning stuff is, keeping my distance, looking for some Doom or something, some chemical to massacre the bastard, but there's only this pale blue tile-cleaner stuff. So I spray it over the thing a few times and it wriggles its head like its singing in the shower, and I wait, fully expecting it to ask for the dishwashing liquid.”

“You probably made it stronger,” Buddy Kelly said and smiled, tucking into his meal.

Across the table Chester was chewing savagely, mouth open, arms agape. “I swear the next day the spatula was missing. Big stainless steel one.”

“They say those things can survive fallout.”

“Also descended from pigeons,” the fat man said, as if his point was now proven. He lit a cigarette.

“They have surveillance everywhere in this place, you know,” said Buddy Kelly. “How often you do this?”

Chester's mouth assumed a fiendish grin. “First time,” he said, shovelling pumpkin.

“Right. You needed an accomplice.”

“Don't worry, they only review that stuff if something blows up or money disappears. Besides, that lady,” he pointed through the building's translucent husk to an obese woman, “wearing the chair like a harness? She eats six times this combined. And that's between meals. No one'll ever know.”

Buddy Kelly noticed that Chester had an air of protest when he spoke. His words seemed tinted with unsolicited personal injustice. “Fine. Well, thanks,” Buddy Kelly said. “It's better than Susie's Samp and Beans. Better view.”

Chester touched the brim of an imaginary hat and they finished their food in silence. Buddy Kelly felt his face faintly singe and he revelled in the lick of the untampered rays.

“You don't often feel the sun down there,” Buddy said, and he stood up and walked over to the railing, resting his folded arms on top.

A few metres below there was a net around the building's girth, like a rickety walkway around the top of a volcano, and looking through it, the surface of the building appeared to run straight down, sleek and slippery, though he knew it bulbed, and he was overwhelmed and stumbled back to the table. He slumped into the chair with his hand over his eyes and when he removed it he caught a suspicious look from a middle-aged woman wearing an insignia broach, through two layers of glass. His body, meanwhile, explained in linguistic panic that he was terrestrial and should not be so far above the earth.

"Oh, ja," Chester said, "don't look down."

The sky was a singular blue behind Chester's head, placid, with jetstreams from air traffic like papercuts rippling here and there out to nothing. Immediately around loomed the other UP towers. Small sections of people from every angle were visible, floating past the hundreds of windows. In the immediate surrounds, many edifices ended high above their eye-level, embodying myriad designs, each individual, each a testament to the capitulation of physics to man's creative will.

One massive tower was twisted in helices like a giant concrete screw bored through the earth from the other side, with a curved steel spine running its length. Some constituted stacks, increasingly diminutive, like old pyramids, with gold or silver capped apices. There were roofs with solar panel slants, some buildings with fluked, cog-like bodies, and that one, there, looked like it was modelled on a clutch-pencil. But most were rectangular and grey or tan with flat square tops, each with rows and columns of rectangular windows, each fused to the concealed ground below and hived with people breathing and excreting with an edacious insatiability.

Chester nodded encouragingly and Buddy Kelly stood up and went over to the railing, keeping his line of sight parallel to the ground.

"Where do they find dolphins anyway?" Buddy said.

"Farms. Where else? Although I heard there are nature reserves everywhere. On the outskirts," he said, sounding not quite convinced.

Buddy Kelly admired the synthetic panorama and felt momentarily light-headed, inflated with levity, because it was beautiful, unholy but remarkable.

Although the buildings shrank as the city sprawled outwards, it was a clear day and the terrain was mostly flat, bulging here and there into a shallow hill. All the way through the clear air to the horizon, where the blue seemed to turn to mist and nestle down in front of the light, there was no signifier of open space. The stretches without towers were where roads must have run, and occasionally through a rare breach there were leaves, green and

swamping, and here and there was standing water, small parks and resting chimney stacks, but the ground was like a veined rock formation except angular and kaleidoscopically dull, washed in the colours of foundation and structural strength. And on the horizon a cityscape reared like sutures closing a wound between earth and sky, and Buddy Kelly said, “How far does it go? Until these outskirts?”

“It goes,” said Chester, “further than the eye can see.”

Buddy Kelly felt thrilled by the city's proportions, exhilarated by access to this vantage point, and he felt a companionship with this man, a few minutes ago a stranger.

“I wonder how much longer we have left,” Buddy Kelly said, suddenly morose. “I wonder where we'll go. It's like this everywhere isn't it?”

“You know, the world's become bigger,” Chester began, improvising. “People once thought their smelly town or island was the world, hard to believe, and danced around the sun arse-naked, praising this set of gods or that, happy to be safe, happy to be far from the edge of the sea. Then it enlarged as did space into an expanding universe, as if it wasn't big enough. And then it became smaller because everybody came to know everybody else's business, talking to one another on the other side of the globe, contracting time if you want to be dramatic, like sort of claustrophobic, no more savage lands to penetrate with your flag-pole.”

“There's always the moon. Oh, wait.”

Chester's eyebrows furrowed. The strange cynical smile disappeared from his face. “It's like I said. You can find out anything, and as far as I know, ja, it's like this everywhere. It's like anything else, really.”

“How's that?” Buddy asked.

“Unprecedented.”

“So you've left this place?” Buddy Kelly said, the playfulness turned dry in his tone.

Chester took one hand into the other. He looked at them. He nodded, “Yup. It's like this everywhere, more or less. Reached a sort of equilibrium, except for the farms.”

Buddy Kelly looked at his full cheeks and fair hair and turned and gazed across the isometric shale.

“Some people, they're waiting for something to happen, they think there's somewhere more for us to go. Something more for us to do. But, truthfully, the smart ones, the wise ones, they don't want anything more to happen.”

Chester's words dissipated quickly into the expanse.

“You ever heard of a place called Azania?” Buddy asked.

Chester seemed to pause, tilting his head like that confused dog. “I have,” he said, “Vaguely.”

“What's it like?”

“I'm sure it's like anything else.”

“Unprecedented?”

“Exactly.”

Buddy Kelly said, “We better go.”

“Buddy Kelly. You're a mysterious fellow. Sitting quietly not judging people. Is that right? Expecting nothing because you know you'd have to take it away from someone else? Am I close? Eyes swimming and you don't even know it. Eighty percent of people are morons. Stupid bumbling slaves, do you know that? The rest, they're cruel. You should get in their way. You should be yourself.”

Buddy was taken aback and Chester realised that perhaps he should have been more patient, played the nice guy and left things unspoken, but he was used to hard types, forthright types, and this young man was anything but that.

“I don't think I could possibly be anyone else,” Buddy Kelly said, his soft features, his slippery eyes, his full lips, struggling to properly engender indignation. “What do you know about me anyway?”

“You're right, Buddy Kelly,” he said, looking at his hands. “You're mostly right, except here's the thing. You're all wrong. I know that you can do better than an analyst in this crappy tower.”

“Don't think you know a thing about me,” his voice crackling slightly.

Chester looked him in the eyes and smiled. “Ja, I know. To be continued, let's go.”

They left the trays and crockery on the table and the woman with the broach trained her eyes on them as they made for the foyer.

“Ready for the bear-hug?”

They stood and scanned around and waited for two people to slide through the building's core in one of the other elevators. Chester summoned another and then this hefty, older man picked up Buddy Kelly and they sped down to forty-three.

“You think it's important what you do here all day?” the stubbled man asked.

“I suppose,” replied Buddy Kelly.

On forty-three they shook hands and Buddy Kelly gave him his card (Chester did not offer his). Buddy thanked him for the lunch they had stolen – ever polite, as was his way.

Chester looked at him, presenting as sincere an expression as his Wayfarers would allow for, said, “Godspeed.”

Chester remained in the lift, and Buddy Kelly did not see it, but once the doors had slid closed, he smiled wickedly.

Part II

The Last Great Sanctuary

It was during those last days of summer, with the warm air lounged across the metropolis, that Buddy Kelly's demeanour perked up unknowingly, every time he beat the few stars home.

Two days had passed and he had not seen Chester again. He hadn't seen him on the streets nor in the underway, and he hadn't heard the mock-despair of his voice within the populous avenues of the office hall. Buddy Kelly wasn't much surprised by his absence, but he felt an unnetted butterfly in his gut from time to time, an implacable skittishness, as prey feels, watched from the periphery. He had been searching the faces around him for a returned glance, but Chester hadn't been there.

Buddy Kelly wanted to relive their escapade. He wanted to study the map crawling far below, to pinpoint the tenements of Umzimbeet street and the man-made forest in which his first home was nestled. This time, he wanted to try the fish.

Buddy Kelly had bought some tulips from a street vendor on the way home. These weren't the only flowers in the flat that day, for Catherine Kelly had just announced her retirement. This was perhaps a sign that she was finally giving up on that chronic hallucination of her former life.

Winch would have scoffed affectionately at flowers. Buddy Kelly could envisage his teasing manner (or was it Buddy's own invention, an inferred recollection?). He could imagine his father explaining how the plastic ones were more practical, how they lasted incomparably longer.

Catherine Kelly was preparing dinner. She was baking chicken steaklets which had been processed into identical little ovals, each perceptibly asymmetrical, consolatory hints they had been cut from birds once living. She had her gin and tonic and was standing guard by the oven door, as if the contents might claw their way out and try to run away.

Buddy Kelly was arranging the various bouquets – there was barely enough room in the flat for them all – when suddenly, from outside, came a biting shriek, a piercing human alarm. Buddy Kelly looked at his mother with eyes agog. He moved to the window beside his bed and leaned out over the ivied sill (as one might from a train, with hamstrings stretched).

He saw, on the pavement below, a small girl in a green school blazer. She appeared roughly nine or ten years old, and had thick, plaited hair, and a tubby face. This girl had a

small tennis-racket rammed in the air, trophy-like. She seemed to be vibrating in a seizure of delight, having just taken a point off a slim, dark woman, clearly her mother, who was jogging off to fetch the ball.

The sound she had made was one unformable by the throats of those long since drifted from infancy. It was unabashed, uncensored, so hysterical and wholesome as to sound ambivalent, like the revelries of a baby, but stronger, sharper, and Buddy Kelly smiled and watched the two play. Both of the competitors were oblivious of the cars passing by, of the commuters, and across their imaginary court spanned a palpable adoration between them.

“M-mom-my,” the little girl squealed, splitting the word in a titter, “watch me!”

The girl served and her mother reached with ungainly feminine grace, her rich hair trailing like a cape.

Somewhere, behind and through the buildings, lay the sun’s last stroke of red, which infused with cooler hues faultlessly over the sky’s pelt, to a deep, blackening blue on the other horizon. The streetlights sputtered on, joining the many bulbs already glowing behind windows.

Buddy Kelly then noticed, to his left, someone else leaning out of another flat’s window. This man had his elbows on the sill, his long chin in his hands, with a cigarette to his mouth. He was watching the mother and daughter, too.

“Twee, hey?” Buddy Kelly said.

The young man lifted his head. “They live upstairs,” he said, “They’re attached at the hip. That little girl wants to be just like her mommy.”

Buddy Kelly heard, in this small sound bite of his neighbour’s voice, his singular tone which seldom fluctuated. His vocal effort was dopey, sinusey, somehow cumbersome, originating from the base of his knobby larynx. His neck was long and curved, and when he spoke his Adam’s apple dived and dipped.

They watched the mother and daughter in silence for a minute, while below the game had swung. The girl was now submerged in a flash-flood of words, swim-breathing: “That’s not fair you know you’re bigger than me, I hate it when you do that, that’s why I don’t like to play with you.”

The mother was trying to reason with her daughter. “It’s just a game,” she said. “Must I let you win?” The mother’s voice was soft, uncomfortably overheard.

Buddy Kelly smiled at his neighbour. The latter rolled his eyes and grinned, said in his drawl, “We were going to bring you ‘round some house-warming muffins. But I can only make one type of muffin. And I don’t think it’s your old lady’s flavour.”

His smile was sedate – his mouth always kept compact – and his narrow eyes were hushed in a long broad face, under a crop of sandy hair. He had an air of benevolence about him. Tall and bony and kind.

“That’s all right, man,” Buddy Kelly said. “How you keeping?”

“I’m really struggling, actually, being this damned happy all the time.”

Music from his neighbours’ window melded with the kitchen clankings and the tang of twilight.

The drawn man’s lips crinkled and he turned and retracted his head, which was, on the end of his willowy neck, like an eye on its stalk. His long head swung out again. “My brother says you must come over and meet the crew,” he said.

So far Buddy Kelly had evaded much contact with the denizens of his tenement. He generally moved up the stairs and past his front-door, conspicuous as a spy. But he knew that he should meet his neighbours before he became the subject of gossip (most vicious in his imagination), before it became awkward to encounter them on the stairs. Somehow, the shared scene below had also affected his response.

“Sure, ja,” Buddy Kelly said. “I’ll be there in like twenty minutes.”

“Okay ... okay,” his neighbour said, head bobbing.

They ate mostly in silence, Buddy Kelly hearing his mother’s questions far off, background noise to his industrious thoughts.

“I met a guy at work the other day,” Buddy Kelly said in the after-dinner lull. “Funny fat guy, kind of forward. Name’s Chester.”

“That’s great,” she said, sounding pleased. “What’s he do?”

“Same as me.”

“What’s his surname?”

“I don’t know. I just met him.”

“How’d you meet him?” she said.

“Jeez, Mom, on the street. This twenty questions? He approached me and said I had a look or something. Noticeable in a crowd.”

Her forehead rumped for an instant. She started stacking the plates. “What did he want?” she asked after a moment.

“Nothing. Just to chat.”

They stood up, chairs chafing the floorboards.

“Buddy?” she said. “Maybe you should bring him around sometime, your new friend?”

“Maybe.”

He went into the bathroom, checked his reflection, and went out onto the landing. He knocked twice on his neighbours' door: 602.

“Long time,” the starveling said, ushering him in.

“Too long,” said Buddy Kelly instinctively, clutching at a cheerful familiarity, but he doubted it was appropriate before he said it, and what came out was a mumble. The type of thing a crazy person would utter.

Inside, the room was identical in dimension and repair to his own. It was a studio apartment. The walls were quilted in colourful prints and scrolls depicting bands and icons and fantasy lands, and there was a collection of peculiar objects scattered throughout: a shelf dedicated to posed action figures who wielded oversized weapons, oversized busts. And there was an inflatable seat in the shape of lips, and a miniature bar complete with retro cushion-stools, a keg-tap, a bubbling lava lamp.

The remnant pong of a thick smoke sweetened the flat. And music saturated the air, a mellowing presence of steady bass and drums and guitars, circled by sparkly keyboard notes, leading the thoughts furtively along. A forlorn male voice with gentle timbre was singing something about wishful thinking; safeguarding from silence.

Beside the main, overhead light hung a disco ball which checkered the walls in green, and near the kitchen sat two men and a woman around a table. This table was carpeted in green felt and was strewn with plastic chips, with four playing cards arranged face-up in the middle. The men were holding their hands close to their noses.

They all looked around, except for the fellow with the blond ponytail, whom Buddy Kelly recognised as one of the Behr brothers, the one who had helped with his furniture – who had whisked most of it up by himself. This Behr brother was facing away from the front door, and he now stuck a flat hand over his head, palm facing Buddy; a kind of wave cum salute.

“I’m Squig by the way,” the bony man said, shaking Buddy's hand. He eased towards the table. “That’s my twin, Zander.”

The broad hand swatted up again.

“Ja, we’ve met,” Buddy Kelly said.

The woman had stood up, walked over to Buddy Kelly. She offered a hand, slightly upturned.

“Tina Lark,” she said, driving a sincere look into his eyes.

He took her hand and just then she leaned forward and he leaned forward and they veered the same way but she dodged quickly and kissed his cheek in some perfunctory

ritual the others had discounted as necessary. She was undeniably pretty, plainly dressed in a long, rushed skirt, in a modest halter top.

Squig tambourined his rawboned hands by his ears – which normally dangled from his wrists as if over wheelchair armrests.

“You've caught us in a rather dangerous moment,” Squig said. “See, my brother’s got the straight and JC,” (he lifted a sorcerer’s finger and indicated the man to Zander’s right), “JC thinks he’s bluffing.”

Each of these characters immediately congealed a dominant epithet in Buddy Kelly's mind, an impression to blink against a sunken and hypothesised edition of himself.

JC's hawkish head was mostly shaven, but for a shallow black mohawk which stretched from the sharp hook of his hairline in a gelled prism.

“That’s right, JC!” Zander said. “You know my little brother’s incapable of lying. Genetic thing. You’d be wise to heed his words,” his head wobbling slightly as he spoke.

JC appeared unperturbed. He appeared generally unimpressed. He was solemn, capped in chrome – that initial intuition of Buddy Kelly's having to do with a self-possession, an assuming confidence, evinced by the way he sat proudly. That said, Buddy Kelly thought he glimpsed in his face the capacity for gentleness. He had resourceful eyes, sensuous lips, and dark sprayed cheeks, but he looked seriously at his cards, at Zander, with the edge of his mouth hooked upwards belyingly. Buddy Kelly was immediately wary of him, this straight-backed hybrid. He was the type, Buddy thought, immovable under interrogation.

“It won’t make a difference if he’s bluffing or not,” JC said in a lawful voice.

Squig fuzzed his hands by his ears, as if tortured by disquiet, his brain in the gag about to explode. “Psychological warfare,” he said.

Buddy Kelly felt the need to introduce himself, felt the window was sliding closed, for he feared being anonymous in this room peopled by quintessential souls fully publicised. He knew the longer it took the more mashy it would sound ... and first impressions, first impressions, his father had preached.

“I’m Buddy.”

“We know,” JC said, deadpan.

“I guess I’m finally famous,” Buddy said.

Tina gave a reliable chuckle, a free-sample of her preferred manner of self-assertion – Buddy would come to learn of how she was nearly always flattering and deliberate. She took up her seat at the table.

“You are famous,” Zander said, slapping the chair to his left. “Everyone here knows what you did for the struggle. Come sit down.”

“Everyone except me,” Buddy said, taking up the proffered spot.

The light overhead was covered in a green crepe-paper sphere, and it splashed soft visors from the brow, watermarks worn when music reeled the Behrs' room into session.

Zander slid his torso towards Buddy Kelly, exhibiting his hand. “You think I’ve got a chance?” he said.

Buddy knew what this meant. They all knew what Zander was doing. Buddy Kelly saw the cards but hardly registered their significance. Clamped under Zander's thick thumb was a 10 and a Jack, unsuited.

Buddy Kelly whistled, one unbelieving whistle which rose in pitch as it faded away.

“Buddy?” JC said, lolling forward and invoking the visitor with a tipped hand, waiting for the newcomer to validate his name. “Buddy. Do you know anything about Texas hold 'em?”

“No,” said Buddy Kelly, “not really. But I can count cards. I can count five in a row. That’s a straight, right? Five cards in a row?”

Tina nodded; confirmer of truth.

Buddy Kelly looked again at Zander's cards, then at the flop. He marked his mental addition with nods. “No,” he announced. “No, he missed it.”

“Psssshht,” went JC, “I think *you’re* the bluff.”

Buddy Kelly shrugged.

JC glowered at Zander, at the ponytailed man's bottomless grin.

“Whenever you’re ready *compadre*,” Zander said.

On the table was a king, ace, 10 and 3. All of Zander’s chips had been swept in. He had missed the run but there was still the river to flop.

Squig, meanwhile, was reclining in the velvety green chaise, up against the wall. His body was stacked awkwardly, his bones jostling (like a sectioned tent pole), zigzagging and elbowing for a gravitational centre. Yet, his fingers worked nimbly, knitting together a joint which he licked closed and lit. “How is it that these two always end up sparing into the night?” came Squig's drone, “Why don’t you two just flop them out and we can measure?”

“Fine. I fold,” JC slumped into his chair and flicked an Ace and a 3 onto the table.

“Good move,” Zander said, a smugness rollicking in his voice. “Better safe than look a fool. I had you beat.”

He showed his cards and JC bolted up, hand cupped over his mouth.

“Unbelievable bastard!” JC said.

Tina laughed applaudingly and, for some reason, Buddy Kelly caught a vision of her, compassionate and prim, explaining to an insentient drunk that he didn't need alcohol to have a good time.

"Is it over?" Squig said.

JC started pacing. He cast a thunderbolt finger at Zander who said, "Dealer, show us the next card *s'il vous plaît?*"

Tina's fingers rushed to the deck, slowing as they alighted on the top card. She flipped it over formally, placing it perfectly straight in its reserved place. Her croupier hand then brushed over the display, halting to hover over the irrelevant addition: the 3 of hearts.

JC gave a cry, fretted through his fingers.

"What, you guys bet your mothers on this game or something?" Buddy Kelly said, embroiled in the excitement.

Tina shook her head, ever on the watch to catch stray conversation. "They probably would," she said, "but you really don't want to know."

"Kimba Fox," Squig said from the couch, closing one eye as he inhaled.

"Sounds like a pornstar," said Buddy.

"No," Zander said sharply. "No, you take that back!"

Tina chuckled. JC, meanwhile, rattling off expletives to himself.

"Kimba Fox is a goddess," Zander continued. "She sycamored down from the heavens. Some say, she came up from below." He took the joint from Squig and sucked in, nipping off the ends of his words sharply, his hands jabbing the air. "Kimba Fox. Kimba Fox! She has the power to explode your balls on sight."

"On your balls' sight of she," interjected Squig.

"Thank you brother. Exactly. She could sing you back into the womb, back into a thumb-sucking foetus every night. And now she's mine." He wrung his hands wildly, prancing around the room, gloating to the characters on the walls, to the fridge.

The sad voice was singing; a eulogy for a future age. Tina was shaking her head teacherly.

"She can make a grown man break down with a look," said Squig from the couch.

"She probably has Chlamydia," Tina said.

"Tina!" said Zander mockingly.

"If STDs were transmitted through eye-fucking, maybe. She'd have the whole gamut, and a silo full of kids," said JC, finally lured away from his self-chastisement.

"What?" said Tina. "She's a good time girl isn't she. Isn't she ... a slut."

“Tina! What would Jesus say about this language?” Zander said, performing a haka by her shoulder.

“Practice safe sex, wear contact lenses,” said Squig.

“So you just won her in poker?” Buddy Kelly asked.

“She’s not even close to yours yet,” JC said. “For one, we haven’t even finished the game. And you’ve still got to court her somehow. It’s got to be consensual, not your style, I know, but honestly Zander, I don’t think you’re man enough to handle her.”

“She is the impossible woman,” Zander said ponderously, while stroking his lemony goatee. He sucked on the joint and offered it to Buddy Kelly, who refused. Some of the chemical scum had already crept into his nose, had already sensed his sanitary mental processes, that they were all too well connected, all too securely linked to the one before. The smoke seemed to dam his ears. He had felt surprisingly at ease enmeshed in the raillery, but now his thoughts began to echo inwards off his eardrums and a displacement was starting to pool.

“Someone explain it to the newbie,” JC said, as if well-read in facial contortion.

“These two, Zander and JC, manage musical acts,” Tina explained, shuffling the cards. “They call themselves the ‘Behr group’.”

“The term is *band* Tina,” said Squig, “and they pretend more than manage. Glorified groupies.”

“Keep your beautiful nose out of this, brother,” Zander said, rejoining the table.

“Anyway, they saw this *band* the other night --” Tina was saying.

“Miss Fox and the Jackal Pack,” Squig said.

“God! Can’t I tell a story?” Tina snapped. The others’ eyes widened; they swapped incredulous smiles over her transgression. “Honestly you’re all children,” she went on. “That’s what they’re called, Buddy: Miss Fox and the Jackal Pack. And the big news is that three of them are, gasp!, female. And *Kimba*,” she said with contempt, “well, they all want to devour her now.”

“You would too, if you saw her,” Zander said to Buddy Kelly, and, whilst eyeing Tina warily: “She’ll make you weep a milky discharge.”

“She’s supernaturally stunning,” JC said. “Hot commodities.”

“Chest Zeppelin beanbags,” chimed Squig.

Tina slapped her forehead in defeat. The play resumed.

“You should come this Friday. They’re gigging at Sliver,” Zander said, scrutinising his cards. JC shot him a look.

“Ja, sure,” Buddy Kelly said.

Squig poked out his head from behind a graphic novel, “Maybe she’ll go for him.”

“Maybe she will,” Tina said, smiling sweetly.

“I still don’t know why I’m famous,” said Buddy Kelly.

“All in time young grasshopper,” said Zander. “The truth in time.”

Zander Behr made a bold stalk through the tepid night.

He was loping in front of the others with a predatory stride, with a volatility packed in the muscle around his shoulders, his limbs like pistons pumping, his head thrust forward, and the others followed the rallying stroke of the blond tuft swinging from his scalp.

They cut through the tunnel of night, an abandoned galaxy painted on its walls, a peeping moon, a million forgotten ears and eyes hiding among the flaring lights.

Squig Behr blew smoke-rings from his mouth as he walked. This was the cigarette designated for the journey, chosen and stowed to mark this particular interval, the change of setting and the unroofed gap to the sky.

Squig was uncannily unlike his brother. He stepped now with a shambled density, as if he was unused to the harsh fact of gravity. There seemed a disconnection between the water-bird slide of his head and the placement of each foot. His arm rose, as if plaster-cast, and he inhaled heavily and they surged on, Buddy Kelly at his side.

All along Umzimbeet street were the marks of individual habitation: parked cars and shifty litter, and tomorrow it would all be rearranged.

They walked under the elms and oaks, those big generic trees within their hard-armoured bark, which infested the surrounds with their chunky shade and shelled droppings.

Occasionally, a car ambled down the street, its headlights stretching their shadows up onto the walls. A woman on a scooter now veered around the group without looking for their faces. She stopped on the corner and entered a neon-bannered café, its shelves thick with eclectic boxes and tins and bottles.

They had already gathered for a 'pre-mission briefing' (as Zander put it) at the Behrs' flat before setting out. They had joked and downed tequila. This meeting had the purpose of aligning their attitudes to the festivity the weekend heralded – and the purpose of lining their stomachs. The music had roared, this time fast and heavy, and had worked covertly to shove aside considerations for the coming morning, to underwrite its scripted reflections. There had been a screaming voice celebrating animosity, and the double bass drumming had lauded a brand of vengeful solipsism in the flat.

Buddy Kelly could feel now, as he walked, an alcoholic hollow channelling through his connective tissue; an invigorating detachment. This was the tickling of mob-mentality.

Zander jumped and kicked-off an alabaster pillar, vaulting into the air and spinning around full-circle while cantering, “*Friday night fever!*” Every so often, he turned and conducted the others forward, clicking his fingers – straight out of *West Side Story*.

“So what is it, you know, that you guys do?” Buddy Kelly said, his hands slotted neatly into his denim jacket, his work-shoes ticking off the pavement.

“That’s a good question,” Squig said, blowy exasperation bookending his response. “We’re been trying to figure that out for years.” He seemed unfit to offer a longer explanation.

“What is there to do in Dalphiney? We turn the cogs,” JC said. He was walking behind the Behrs and Buddy, with Tina’s arm looped around his elbow. Tina was quietly confident, and looking uncharacteristically striking clothed in tight brown corduroy, which creased with her skin at the top of each leg.

“We had this discussion the other day,” Squig continued with consistent dispassion. “What was it we decided? Oh, ja, we’re waiting for World War three.”

“Maybe third time lucky,” Buddy Kelly said.

Zander swung around to walk backwards again. A mischievous smile stretched through his features, which pinched and pantomimed as he spoke. He said, “You should know your words have consequences, brother. We all enable that morbid self-fulfilling prophecy, the one they call history. But, you get that feeling, don’t you? That something’s got to give.”

“But you boys can talk nonsense, hey! I’m going to be psychologist,” Tina said from the back.

“Here’s what we do in the meantime,” Zander said. “All the humans should get together and play broken telephone. In Ushankas. With the ear-flaps up.”

“Because we can only fit in the Siberian tundra?” Buddy Kelly said cheerfully.

Zander swivelled to face forward, “No, just because.”

“It’s not that we aren’t lazy,” Squig said, brushing a dead leaf off his shoulder. “Don’t get me wrong, we’re lazy as hell. But give us something to do for fuck’s sake.”

“And here’s the crux,” Zander said, “something we give a shit about. Does that answer your question?”

“Pretty much,” said Buddy Kelly, smiling.

“Well, there’s always Kimba Fox,” JC said. “Something to get motivated about. And she doesn’t seem to mind the attention.”

“She probably has histrionic personality disorder,” Tina said, proffering an explanation from her psychology courses.

A ponderous silence followed.

Zander stopped by the underway stairs of Umzimbeet station and lifted himself onto the banister. The others caught up and gathered around him.

“Ready ladders?” Zander said, wringing his hands, his booted feet dangling above the stairs. “Don’t want to miss the show.”

“Are *you* ready?” JC said. “You forgot your spurs.”

Zander slapped JC’s shoulder, “So caring. Don’t worry old friend.” He said emphatically, “She will be mine.”

Squig looked at Buddy Kelly and rolled his eyes affectionately. He flicked away his stompie which barrel-rolled onto the tarmac, leaving an orange stunt-plane trail lingering on his retinas.

“Once more unto the breach, dear friends,” Squig said.

“The sinews stiffen,” said JC.

“Then imitate the tiger!” Zander said and he leapt into the florescent underground.

Buddy Kelly's soft face gleamed with pleasure. He felt admiration for such a highly garnered role, for the liberty of voice these four had achieved in their uninhibited volleying. It seemed as if they had perfected their own little troupe, each gladly included for their difference. But he suddenly experienced a poisonous reminder from the outsider in him – you can’t fit in, it said – and he needed to speak and felt relief at the immediate promise of another drink.

“You guys party every Friday?” he asked as they huddled down the stairs. “I haven’t been out for a while. Normally come home poor.”

“It depends like most things,” JC said coldly.

“Ja?”

“It depends on whether we go out or not.”

Buddy Kelly's eyes fled from JC's handsome face, to the void above the iron-thatched cleft.

“JC’s an asshole,” Tina said, disentangling her arm. “Did we tell you that?”

“When Miss Fox and the Jackal Pack go out, we go out,” Zander said.

15. This Mesmerising Being

There was a bakery on the corner.

From the street one could see the voluptuous pastries on display, the lofty croquembouche. These delicacies were plump and glazed bronze, and the pink neon tubes which wormed along the shelves topped them off with a rosy sheen.

The bakers were behind the scenes. They were in the kitchen, busy pounding dough, beating eggs, and the woman behind the till (with ever a fraction of a thought reserved for the pistol on top of the safe), had learned not to watch the street, not to question the quiet start to the evening.

She knew they would stream in later. Deep into the morning hours, the patrons would come, with their minds disburdened of their seeds of misdeed, each with their bounty spent, each with their secreted sin. They would line up in droves for cream puffs and strudel, for Palmiers and Danishes, to sweeten the taste on their marred breath, to sweeten the taste of their deceit.

By the corner were rubber-capped stairs which descended under an arched sign – *Peach St.* – and led down to the florescence of the underworld. The shelves of frosted treats were the first things they would see, those alighting here to the uncomplaining night. The trays of waxy chelsea-buns would be an image to stow away for their salivating minds, and the last temptation, at least for some, as they made their way home.

Zander always seemed to take the lead. But Buddy Kelly was glad to march in his shadow. Buddy hoped that he might have his place in the group after all, that his timid voice might interpose their cantankerous banter. He was glad to be alongside Zander's stilt-limbed brother (reaching now for a pre-club smoke) as they arrived on Peach.

Here, as one in a crowd dressed in their best, it was in no way unprecedented to expect the unexpected. This highly evolved stretch, maybe 14 blocks long, seemed to be a living discussion on the finer points of morality. It was like a scene in a fold-up book, with half the characters inked black, the other half white.

The dealers lurked here, three to a block, and the citizens kept them alive. And the kidnappers scanned for individuals walking alone, because these stragglers kept them alive. And the police (and the security staff in their martial jackets) ignored the drunks and their victims, for there occurred acts of such gross misdeed here, as to make some public indecency more than excusable.

If it could be done, it was done on Peach street.

And the muggers, although leaning up against pillars and whistling at the girls like sailors, were all the while looking for the fat back-pockets.

Gangs of children milled about around the cafés, their little fingers fondling grizzly shanks. There were the hookers with an eye out for fresh heartbreak. There were drugs and there was murder.

And it was this paradox, electric in the air, that kept the regulars coming back, kept them coming back and feeling alive because death was so close – and it was, also, the promise of the unexpected.

And so when a sketchpad gyrated out of the night and landed in Buddy Kelly's hands, with the over-worked sketch of a face staring up at him, his compatriots were most surprised that he had caught it – it might have been a bottle; a white-appliance.

Entering Sliver, they passed a lanky man wearing a bedraggled beret askew on his matted hair, with burns across his face – although they all seemed less than surprised. He looked upset; busting out of the place in a hurry.

“You alright, man?” Buddy Kelly said. His tone did not match the temperament of the scene. “Is this yours?”

“Don't look at me again. You hear me?” he said and he was gone.

The posse shrugged at one another and tailed Zander up the narrow metal stairs, stopping to visit the bar before taking their places in front of the stage.

Soon, Kimba was clearing her throat, and the whispers died away. There remained a static, dense and unstable in the air: the amplifiers cranked up and impatient to begin. Ranks of fans and newcomers alike enfolded the curve of the stage, jostling affably for room, their eyes eager and set. They, like Buddy Kelly, had heard the rumours.

The crowd inspected her, her coquettish stance. Shielded by her black guitar, she tipped from the waist into the ice-cream cone microphone, her lips a small breath away. She was poised in an easy feminine lean, one of her feet edged in front of the other, with a suggestion of exposure in the way she tilted her back, in the way her long figure was coerced by the demands of balance, by the burden of her talents, to minutely protrude her buttocks. She was in the centre and foremost, her four disciples in a half-moon behind her.

She began strumming ghost notes in a four-beat rhythm (with a waltz veiled between each punctuated measure), rousing the rows of heads to ease from side to side like cardboard waves. For two long bars she played unaccompanied, conveying the rhythm, and already she was softly aflame on stage, already covetous of all the attention there to be

given. Then the violin interjected with six haunting notes, which spiked and vanished. And by and by, the bassist in his bowler joined in with a walking progression, his griffin face grooving back and forth, his thick fingers spidering down the fret-board, underpinning her playing with deep, sustained vibrations.

She sang.

Her voice was low and pure, rasping, virginal. She had an air of reclusivity about her, a self-possession, as if immured beyond rescue behind her dark brown eyes. A low-cut blouse, pocked with stale flowers like a mothballed wedding dress, cut diagonally across each pursed breast, its sleeves ending just over each round shoulder. It clung delicately to her stomach, baring the slight swell of her belly to the spotlights, and a black tie hung in the cleft down her front. Her hair was bunched inside a fedora.

“The rain falls on my face, but washes nothing away,” she sang, with the lead guitarist harmonising along. The blended sound was eerily smooth and beautiful.

Kimba Fox blazed gently on stage, with a candid sexuality. Her hips and shoulders slithered from left to right in silky counter-rhythm – by a seemingly involuntary persuasion – and she was slender, unmuscled; a girl meek to the commissions a woman must endure.

The crowd all watched her. They were running their hands around her delicate neck, turning her head with a palm against her cheek, tasting her skin.

She had, mixed in with the softness of her face, the melancholy of slavery, as if she was an exotic act from a mysterious world, chained to her cage; behind each exhalation, the dream of freedom. No one spoke nor shuffled.

She glared outward as if blind, as if oblivious to any singularity, and channelled all minds to where they were needed, in a vortex to bolster and charge and soothe the soul bid by her voice. The drums, bass, guitar, violin, all swept in and converged for the chorus.

“And darling I’ll wait for you, till we get to the end, my lover and friend.”

“The impossible woman,” Zander shouted to Buddy Kelly, who nodded categorically, retaining her in his vision.

She was born to be here, he thought. She gathered and focused all streams of thought, wrapped them around her. She was conceived for this purpose – the single right sperm and the right egg to match the name – and what a pretty girl she must have been, lathered with attention and intelligent enough to know she should devise to snub it. The contradiction that had made her. She looked down to her sprinkling hands, to her silver wristlet, her eyelashes stark against the cherry light.

Her voice was pliant, viscous, and bridged a range of emotions which they relied on her to articulate this way; the ordinary people. She released a vision of the secret beauty of people, of how richly they could suffer, how desperately they could want. She demonstrated she was worthy of idolatry.

And there was insomnia under her eyes. And she smiled a reckless smile after the song, a quick, beguiling show of her complacency. She flaunted her eyes, their unruliness, their absence of fear. The multitude of celebrating witnesses felt, as she would have it, that she might have cried once, but there were no more tears, they had left her, along with peace, for this passionate culpability. Her eyes told them this was Kimba Fox, martyr for the music.

“I see what you mean,” Buddy Kelly yelled into Zander’s ear, the latter pumping his fist over the line of heads in front of him, adding his cat-call to the raucous applause.

Zander beamed with childish excitement, “Third time I’ve fallen in love with this girl.”

They were standing in the fourth row of figures crowded into the modestly sized main-room of Sliver. They were all welled in dim crimson, and the air was hot from their interminably metabolising cells.

The sleeve-polished bar had a cast-iron aloe behind it, reaching up at the bottles, and ran along the room’s width, perpendicular to the stage. It was clustered with patrons on the barstools, others swamping their flanks, vying for the bartenders’ attention.

Revellers looked in from the balcony, their faces framed by the bird-cage windows. They were smiling and cheering like voyeurs well satisfied with the exhibition. Behind them were groups of people chatting idly, perched on the radiant membrane of the night, overlooking the activity on Peach, their thoughts led along by the band’s set spilling from inside, now secretly invigorated, as if the cheering was for them.

Kimba Fox picked up the glass waiting on the side of the stage and gulped down its bronze liquid.

“You like that? I don’t really like that,” she said and laughed. “Here now, how 'bout we kick it up.”

Buddy Kelly wondered what type of partner it would take to please her. Or perhaps, if she couldn’t be pleased, what type of person would have put up with her demons?

The afroed drummer now thundered into a rock beat. The forward rows broke into spasmodic dance, mimicking the musicians on stage, who had allowed a controlled energy into their limbs, and moved sexily, with exercised stylishness.

JC stood with his arms folded, a foot tapping on the floor, while Tina Lark and Zander Behr let loose, their arms peddling up by their shoulders, and the awkward Behr brother stepped stiffly in unwitting syncopation.

Buddy Kelly was not ready for this. His thoughts were troubled by the front-woman. He felt oddly disheartened by what he has witnessed, his mind in need of recalibration, as if all his finely tweaked expectations had been reset; in a flashed replay of that moment he learned parents were capable of betrayal.

It was clear to him, from her ostensible beauty, from her disaffected treatment of the power she had been given, that she was too much of a woman for him. 'The impossible woman,' they joked, but why should she be out of his reach, this mesmerising being? It was clear to him she would never allow herself to compromise, nor suffer the domestic grievances of the committedly happy.

Buddy Kelly had always fostered a furtive hope, entangled with a belief about his own self-worth, that he could have been loved by any woman, given the time, that any woman could have come to marvel at a frail and malformed piece of his character, encrypted with a clue to his uniqueness, to the extraordinary goodness dormant inside him. Kimba Fox would have eaten him alive, and he felt he should desire her but now, in imagined intimacy, he felt only fear. Fear of what she might expose in him. How she could have so easily harmed him with one impaling laugh.

He held his empty bottle up to the moshing heads of his new found friends and pointed to the bar. He backed away and the frenzied crowd members made feeble gestures of parting, leaning back, raising their arms, trying to usher the thirsty man through by bodily peristalsis.

A hand landed heavily on his shoulder, yanking him backwards. He turned numbly and it is JC.

“Get us a beer, would you, Buddy?” JC shouted, giving a thumbs-up. Buddy Kelly raised his eyebrows in registration.

Buddy Kelly burrowed through to the thoroughfare lane, which ran parallel to the bar counter, which lead from the bathrooms to the balcony, elbowed here and there by jovial patrons.

A pierced girl turned from the bar, her fingers pincer down the shafts of four half-filled brandy glasses, and Buddy Kelly slotted sideways into her place between two occupied barstools. He leaned over the counter, bobbing his head minutely, as if to make obvious his appreciation of the music.

Behind the bar was a big shouldered barman, swiping a card at the till closest to Buddy Kelly, with a grubby white cloth flopped over his arm. As he worked, leaning heftily to take orders, cupping a hand over his thick ear, his gaze scanned over the faces surrounding the bar, and he skipped along each set of eyes, tossing each a cheeky smile, as if to show off his immunity to the pressure, as if to show off the pleasure which the massed inconvenience afforded him.

On the other side of the bar, a pretty girl manoeuvred feverishly, swinging and grabbing and pouring with inward concentration, hardly perceiving the thronged faces mouthing complicated orders, with foamy drops flying out of the glasses that she banged conclusively on the counter.

Buddy Kelly sighed. He extracted a few notes from his wallet and offered them forward, fanned in a loose grip. He wafted the bait slowly.

To his left was an old man, who was slumped adaptively on the stool, his face scarred with shadows. He had a hump where his spine bowed by the top of his neck, and he wore a woollen jacket, patterned in autumn hues.

This old man moved his head slowly. He sucked on his lips, looked at Buddy Kelly. His eyes were made gracious by his time-weighted eyelids, and an almost imperceptible property was engrained in his face – Buddy Kelly had seen before – the mark of a long, restless existence, nearing the brink of finalisation.

Buddy Kelly looked away, back to the built barman, back to throw out rays of scorn, to join in with those of the others. Maybe together, they would be able to penetrate his thick shell.

The old man smiled tenderly, slid a neutral look to the panoply of bottles. He then looked around, as if in illustration, to the implacable mouths gusting out or taking in, to the busy eyes, comforted by their closeness to the next bipedal vehicle, by the hail of soundwaves.

“You’re munching on the wrong grass,” the old man said, and his voice penetrated the music strongly (most probably owing to his mouth’s proximity to Buddy Kelly’s ear). “You’re courting the wrong mates. The climate’s all wrong for your skin.”

The barman held a finger up in Buddy Kelly’s direction – just a minute – and he shoulder-barged across the counter, turning his ear to a hammocked pair of breasts.

“You ever wonder who those people are who take away your rubbish?” the old man said, and Buddy Kelly suddenly felt slightly queasy, the tequila catching up to him. “You leave it out every week and someone comes and cleans it up. You ever wonder who those people are?”

Buddy Kelly snuck a noncommittal look his way. The old man seemed partly focused on him, and then, it seemed his leisurely patter was aimed at his headless beer.

“What?” Buddy said. “No I don’t wonder. I’ve seen their faces.”

“You look like you’re in a hurry to get out of here.”

“I need a drink,” Buddy Kelly said (against his body's better judgement).

“You need bigger tits.”

“They need more staff.”

“That’s Robby over there. The overstuffed shirt? He’ll get to you only when there’s no more tits.”

“I guess I’d better start growing a pair.”

“Here,” he said, pushing forward a tumbler glass, which still had whole ice-cubes floating in its treacly liquid. “I was saving it for later, but you go ahead.”

Buddy sniffed it and had a gulp. Whiskey.

“How old would you say I am?” the man said. “Honestly?”

One of the tactless drunks, Buddy Kelly thought, alcohol rotted, steered by tatters of a moderate sanity, his life reduced to a largess of extraneous noise. The feeble old man’s hand was locked cadaverously around his beer. White hairs feelered from his chest, over the cockerel pouch linking his neck and chin. His features seemed puffy with age, his cheeks seemed geological, pocked with shallow dents, and his lips were thin and long, with a trapezium under his bulky nose; vacant space for a broom-head moustache. There were faint creases across his forehead, parallel and dipping over wiry eyebrows, white like his thin, cow-licked hair.

“I don’t know, man. Sixty? I just need a drink,” Buddy Kelly said, mildly annoyed by the old man’s prying.

“*You* need a drink. Someone like me needs a drink. If you need a drink probably means you need something else, probably the last thing you need is a drink.”

“It’s Friday night,” said Buddy. “You know how it goes.”

“I know how it goes. Friday night. Everybody has their problems. Monday night. Tuesday morning. Unless you’ve given up, someone like me, someone like me needs a drink, I can understand. You come to accept that need when there is something you cannot heal, when you’ve tried every other course. When you search everywhere for old family like some cheap PI, people who should care for you for whatever reason, and you find them and leech off them and wear them thin. When you have been disfigured inside and you need something else to see you through, something toxic and numbing, because you have given up on trying to be healed. Someone with a lifetime of mistakes to block

out, then you need a drink and you can accept it, then you need to punish yourself because everybody else has forgiven you already, too easily, or because they just don't know, I can understand that."

What was that incondensable span between the old and young? This man, a few decades ahead, tapering like clockwork to the flat of the mortality curve, lost of all cause for ambition, of fleeting dreams of a new start, of a new vocation or love or obsession. Buddy Kelly knew this would be him one day, he knew he'd be left to sit in ghastly restriction and undergo the whole rigmarole of remembrance and, perhaps, of regret, but what was the secret they could not share? The unspoken string of words, replaced by a strained sympathy between them, as if all their talk were one big euphemism?

He had experienced it with his grandfather: a begrudging dependency; a begrudging obligation. Was it a thing he could not understand? Making peace with God before sleep, sleeping clothed, just in case?

But Buddy thought of his predicament. He could visualise the touchy expression on his own face, waiting sparsely as he was for a bartender's election. He was reluctantly grateful for the chance to chat with the old man, even if their languages must clash in misconception.

"I want a drink," Buddy said, "like all these people."

"Sixty-nine," he said. "You were close. Nine years too polite. It's a funny number, sixty-nine. Not so funny when it's how many years you been living, and it seems to stack somehow, the weight of years. Could be ninety-nine years have passed, flashed by in a second. But I recognise that face," he said. "You heard of those wildlife sanctuaries they talk about? Where they protect all the animals?"

"Reclaimed for nature to live in its native environment," Buddy recited. He felt, suddenly, like he was underwater, engulfed in that liquid silence, that blurred sight.

"So, you've heard of them but they're not like that," (Buddy smelt old liquor on his breath), "They're not like that. They're infested with people. More like zoos than anything, like farms, or museums. Museums for living things. Galleries. Interfered with. Monitored."

This old man talked as if to a devoted protégé, without promising the comfort of settlement, his left hand flopping open and curling back closed in Buddy Kelly's periphery, complimenting his words with visual explanation. Buddy heard only his voice; he saw now only the lines on his ploughed countenance.

"Because you know what the difference is? Between this city and those places? Do you know what's the same? What's the same is that you can't escape and that you don't know

any better. What's the same is that everybody is happy because everybody has their problems. If the whole thing's one big problem and always has been, then you don't live in Dalphiney city."

"So what's the difference?" said Buddy, slackly now.

"The difference? Well, I'm glad you asked. The difference is, those interfering people, the ones who like to control, who choose the animals to sustain, choose how they'll live, map their gestation periods, what they eat and what they use for shade and how many of each and which ones will be able to see which other ones, allocate their budgets, those people who decide the order of things, the imperative, the meaning of progress. Those people are native to Dalphiney city. So they control and interfere with themselves, but it's natural here, do you see? And it leads me to think this place is the last true sanctuary. Animals in their native environment as you put it, as you've heard it said. Dalphiney city. The last great sanctuary. It's a way of life preserved and unhindered. This hard city life. The true sanctuary."

Buddy Kelly nodded.

"But I recognise that face. You look lost, like you don't belong here. I can understand that. I can tell you a story I could tell in my sleep, probably do, about a young man, a child really, who wanted to grow up too fast, wanted to jump the queue. He had a nice family, he fed the cat, let his mother kiss him on the cheek every morning before he left or she left, but when he walked outside and saw all the people and all the tall buildings, all the hubbub and happy chaos, he felt a strange sensation, here in the front of his skull. And everyday he watched people study hard so they could work hard, specialise in insurance or business science, become a politician or a police man ... this isn't about the meaning of live before you roll your eyes. Where is it you need to go?"

"It's okay," Buddy slurred but it was too late to back out now. "Finish your story," he said putting a foot desperately on the crossbar of the old man's stool, lifting himself shakily so as to stand a head taller than the others.

"It wasn't that there was no point, that wasn't the problem. He was relatively well-off, but he understood that everyone must find their job so it all fits together nicely. It wasn't that, but it seemed to grow each day, like something you've forgotten to do or a word you know but can't quite find the sounds to, can't quite spell, like an itch you can't scratch, a phantom tumour growing in your head everyday until one day he met this girl. Always a girl, that's the problem with only two sexes. Its either always a girl or always a boy. And he wanted instantly to be her boy because when he saw her, the word came to him, crisp and

bold like through a new pair of glasses. Where is it you want to go? You know what it was, the word?"

"I bet it starts with an 'l'".

"She was pretty, her skin was dark. And she smiled with her whole face and her eyes joined in like diamonds, and her hair was thick and matted, smelt like something he'd never smelt before, sort of salty, richly salty. She was polite and he asked her if she was from the city and she said no, she was from another place, she said she was here to visit a friend, some cursed friend living in a bubble of steel and glass.

"And he asked her about the place she was from and she told him there was a great mountain, like a giant wall sucked up from out of the earth by the gods, that curved around to form a sort of amphitheatre, a half ring, and where the mountains ended was the sea. And she lived inside that natural bowl, their houses climbing half way up its monstrous side, and she lived there among trees and birds and small animals which were there before she was, and that dwelled with them now. The word was 'life'! And that smell on her hair was of the sea."

"I want to go to Azania," Buddy Kelly said woozily.

"And it rained in winter, long phases of soft, gliding rain, and when it rained, small waterfalls cascaded down all the tracks spilling off the mountain and between their small houses, glistening when the sun popped out to remind them it was still there, small branches sidewinding in the rapids. She was a real princess, this girl, and lived with the earth as a neighbour, not as some platform for structural integrity, some undug hole to bury eternal refuse. And the winds coursed out strong from the sky, the visible sky, and flayed the trees to remind them not to confer too much upon themselves, and it railed the dust in the narrow streets into small tornadoes, gold dust, gold dust that stuck to her skin like snowflakes and couldn't be caught. Most of it couldn't be caught and would ride the rivulets and disappear into the lake that formed there a small way from the ocean. All speckled with gold they didn't want or need. Have you ever seen gold?"

Buddy Kelly pulled up the sleeve of his undershirt.

The man released his drink and covered his face with his hand, peeping at the gold through his fingers. Yes, gold like that, I thought.

And a dream. The shape of a girl. Always a girl. The face that a snake smells, that a bat sees. The face that a wolf hears. Beautiful. Nothing to hold on to but a glow, a warmth, like a porcelain princess without a face, without colour. Love like a child. Warmth of a child.

Buddy Kelly woke up on his folded arms, which were resting on a table under the moonlight. Tina's arm was around him.

“Drink some,” she said gently, “it's water.”

Buddy Kelly looked up. He felt bedraggled. Across the table, Zander was grinning, his strong arms wrapped around the petite shoulders of Kimba Fox.

Buddy Kelly replaced his head on the denim. He twisted his hands around to make two partial fists with both thumbs pointing up.

On the way home, they stopped at the bakery and bought a milk tart, of which Buddy Kelly had but a nibble, which he later came to regret.

Fucking *unbelievable*, Chester thought, his crappy cellphone extolling the high-points of its MIDI ring. Who the hell would be calling at – he looked at the digital clock flashing in brown above *Unknown* on the yellow screen – *what audacious bloody joker would be calling at ... 11:12am?*

Well, not *that* unreasonable, he conceded.

He then recalled that he had been determined to catch brunch at the *Mosca* with Blackie and Thelma Marie, a weekly arrangement, which was normally scheduled for 11:30am. There, he had planned on expounding his latest stoke (first for quite some time) of good fortune.

He'd have to rush to get there, and hadn't he ... ? – he glanced with ominous certainty to the other side of the bed, to the curvy, sheet-wrapped lump which resided there. Chester sighed inwardly – yes, he had.

She was on her stomach and her rangy arse was like a tremendous island, like the snout of a whale breaching from a ruffled sea. He poked her hard in the ribs. She gave a dogged grunt – clearly in need of a working over. In the meantime he took the call.

“Bosmans,” Chester said, while slipping on his sunglasses. “What, pray tell, the fuck is it?”

“Mister Bosmans,” – it was Brussel. Chester recognised the man's nasalised self-importance – “I trust you are not indisposed?”

Chester looked again to the undulating terrain of his bed-partner. He jabbed it, this time harder; this time nuzzling between the bones, finding an intercostal vantage-point before making the thrust. The lump whined into the pillow.

“Nothing pressing at the moment,” Chester said, rubbing the thin bridge of his nose (but he couldn't get to the ache in his eyes). Had he ... ? He saw the empty late-harvest dumbbell, the full ashtray. He had.

“Speak Brussel,” he said agonised. “What's the buzz?”

“It's all come together. *Supremely*,” the man said, neutering that last word as only he could. “It's come together most well, Bosmans, if you see what I mean.”

Fucking Brussel, laconic as always.

“I'm so glad,” said Chester sarcastically. And, although his tone was masterly, consummately disconsolate, he was, indeed, genuinely glad. He then felt something else

he hadn't experienced in quite a while, an emotion currently negotiating armistice with his throbbing head: he felt relief. This news might earn him an all-expenses-paid trip to Queenie's harem. What it certainly would earn him, was money – and maybe with the cash, it might be time to clean up his act, after all.

“So, Mister Bosmans,” Brussel said (and Chester could picture the dreary man behind his computer, playing web games or browsing through smut; doing something else as half-heartedly as he conversed), “if you'd be so kind as to share the news with your little friend. As his confidant. And I'm obliged to inform you that the client is very pleased. Supremely pleased if you see what I mean.”

“What joyous news,” Chester said. “I'll call you when it's done.”

“Oh, one more thing, although I'm sure I needn't remind you. But try not make it too obvious what's going on, okay? He leaves in two weeks.”

“Loud and clear,” Chester said.

Chester disconnected and his attempt at a smile was cut short by an incessant pecking; by the woodpecker busy in chiselling a ballad into the front end of his cranium. Chester was nonetheless content.

He felt he needed to celebrate and so grabbed the twenty-pack on the floor by the bed – he always kept a fag for the morning – and felt inside. But there was nothing there but foil. *Fucking bitch!* She must have had it when he had ... fallen asleep. That was before, or after ... before or after they ... fuck it, he thought, flopping onto his firm belly (which was not squishy like hers) next to the determined cadaver, which wobbled as he laid out beside it. Two *vrot* aubergines on a waterbed.

“Darling,” he whispered soothingly into her ear. “*Darling.*”

She lifted her head, settled it back down to squash up against the pillow, now facing him, with her eyes still shut. A cute sleepy face, he thought; nubile.

“Mm?” she mumbled.

“Little Angel,” he said tenderly, “please get the fuck out of my flat.”

She opened one eye, “No morning fuck?”

Chester slithered sideways on the mattress, still on his stomach, got a good grip on her mid-section, and pushed hard. Her arms flailed, clutching at Chester's fat wrists, at the mess of sheets, but the bedding went with her and flumped onto the floor.

She stood up, wide awake now, and livid, looking rather pathetic with her youthful face all mauled in anger, with her cup-and-saucer-nipples hanging by her belly. She began searching, bending over and swearing, through the marsh-like bodies of clothing and linen for members of her scant ensemble.

Chester found a pair of underpants. He drew them up about his noncommittally burgeoning erection. He leaned his hairy torso out of the window, out from the smoky stagnation of the room, into the late morning sunshine. He scanned the pavement for signs of Shortstuff.

"I'm taking this," the woman said, showing a few notes wedged between fingers and a tall-heeled boot, "for a full night. And for emotional *damage*." This final word she emphasised by slamming the door.

God-damned rip-off either way, he thought, when you can't remember a thing.

Chester couldn't see Shortstuff anywhere. There was however another scrawny child below – not in the usual spot on the steps, but a few metres away. This kid was kicking a crumpled can against the tenement wall, singing wordlessly to himself, with a polystyrene cup held between his teeth.

"Scamp!" Chester shouted from the fourth storey. "Oi!"

The boy looked up, removed the cup, grinned.

"Ja, *you*. Where's Shortstuff?"

"Short one's sick," he shouted back loudly (evidently equally unconcerned by the foot-traffic filing by, by the thousand mullioned windows spread across the walls).

Great, Chester thought.

He should have been well on his way to the Mosca by now, to a cheap meal, but then, how could he possibly be expected to set off without his morning cigarette? He opted for delivery instead, and felt a bit better having justified, now cemented, his absence at the diner.

"What's your name, Scamp?" Chester said with languor, expectant of a respectable echo.

"Name is Toloki," the child said peering straight upwards. "I work for Short one. Very trustworthy."

"Tokoloshe," shouted Chester, "wait there!"

He pulled back inside the dingy apartment – which was undeniably malodorous, he could appreciate now – and began scouring through the linen flood-meadow. He turned out pockets, shook out jackets, kicked unpaired socks and shoes into more piles by the skirting boards, ash billowing out of everything, until he had gathered a handful of coins and a few dish-rag notes, fewer than he had hoped. He made for the window, alighted just in time to see whatever-her-name-was stomp off down the street barefooted, looking thoroughly tarty.

"You know what is polony, Tokoloshe?" the big man said. "Not *salami*. Po-lon-y."

"I know," called back Toloki. "*Po-lon-y.*"

"And a pack of *Megas*," he said.

The woman had stopped and was glaring up at him, shaking her head, and Chester went, "Shooo," waving her away.

Toloki watched all this. He watched as the bedraggled woman, tubed in her incomplete, sequined attire, tapped her unshod foot against the pavement. He watched as she shook her head, apoplectic with rage, with sleep in her eyes, from side to side. She had her boots and a small handbag clung to her bosom (it could have been a purse next to those breasts). The diminutive ruffian could not contain himself (to be fair, he hadn't really tried) and laughed furiously, bent over and slapping his thin thighs.

She made a charge at him, a brief and ineffectual stampede. For Toloki had, in his short life, evaded pursuers who were by numerous degrees more agile, who were by great magnitudes more dangerous than she, ducking between their legs, scaling the drain pipes which peppered the city's edifices like magic ropes snaking up and away onto unassailable roofs, vaulting off car bonnets, under eighteen-wheelers, dodging individuals who were unthinkably more angry, and so, as he darted a few steps backwards, his laugh did not even subside.

She eventually skulked around the corner and Tokoki, completely unperturbed, thought the episode worthy of a celebratory jig. This he proceeded to perform with his rump stuck out, with his cheeks inflated. He stepped left and then right, as if an electric wave was being passed through him, and he was but a sulky turkey. These steps were then repeated while he snapped his fingers up at the big man, who had dismissed her like a dog.

"Oi, Tokolosh," said Chester, himself chuckling, "*Megas*. That's the blue ones, neh?"

"Okay. Blue ones, *Me-gas*," said Toloki, suddenly alert and deliberate.

Chester dropped a note which drifted, for all its changing of hands, spastically down into Toloki's waiting fingers.

"I have something nice for you when you come back."

The boy bounded off across the road.

"Tokolosh!" shouted Chester, placing a chunky index finger onto the lower lid of his right eye and pulling it down a few times. "That's right," Chester said to himself, content that the child had understood his meaning, "I'll be watching you."

Of course he wouldn't actually be watching him. The fullest extent to which he planned on watching the child had just now occurred, when Chester issued his threat and still

happened to have his eyes on the boy. He could only hope Tokoloshe had a sense of fidelity, like Shortstuff.

For although Chester was slightly surprised to find Shortstuff absent from his post today, he was still shocked that the little rascal had actually come back with his order, rapping playfully at the door, the first time (granted the boy had brought the wrong cigarettes). This had occurred a few months ago. And things had been delightfully convenient, with Shortstuff there, waiting below his window at noon, every day since. Come weekend or hailstorm.

And Shortstuff had always delivered, although Chester knew himself to be less than generous, under no conditions charitable. Feed 'em scraps was Chester's mantra. Better a titbit every day than a cheeseburger once off. Or maybe a cheeseburger ... Chester's stomach seemed to interject.

But Chester Bosmans had taken care to incrementally raise the service fee (on aggregate) over the last pleasant couple of months. He was now up to 10% on small purchases, 5% on bigger ones (when including bread or booze). Sometimes, Chester even paid extra for an ice-cream for the runner (when he felt uncharacteristically guilty for ordering ice-cream). And if Shortstuff stole the shit and kept the cash, well, good for him and his entrepreneurial spirit. This Tokoloshe though, he was starting at the bottom. And he better make it quick, too.

Not too quick mind, Chester thought, as he moved his right hand down behind the day's randomly selected undies to cup his scrotum.

Considering now his imminent masturbation, he felt a jolt through his genitals, through his still undecided cock. But he also felt a dull, worrying ache inside one of his testicles. The testicle in question was significantly higher up than the other. It had somehow attained some of the pressure of his weight during the nights – like the swing-out leg on a Harley, an outrigger off a heavy hull. And, even more worrying, a vision of a concept which he couldn't recall learning about, a biologically flamboyant cross section of testicular torsion, had been spliced into his recent dreams. Nonetheless, he would proceed as planned, such was the ritual. And his rogue ball was bound to respond when he clapped eyes on Blossom, the love of his life.

Chester made a move for his computer, wherein resided his vast store of unique pornographic memoirs. This was his hallowed vault of wankery.

He had turfed out the whore – was she a whore or had she just robbed him? – in favour of Blossom's violent sensuality, her pivoting legs, her amateur moanings in digital rendition; these were his true and absolute guilty pleasure.

The procedure would not take very long – he was well-practised. And Blossom’s childish face was irresistible. It was innocent, as if she had no idea of where the offshoots of her professional ventures would end up. She seemed unaware of the stigmatisation of the industry, so unlike the other *real* pornstars, who seemed deviously aggressive towards their own exploitation, who groaned in an extremely showy and unrealistic fashion.

Chester had five clips featuring Blossom, four of which had been made before he had raped her.

The one made *post factum* was in no way similar to the preceding ones. It was, in fact, a documentary (which he had stumbled upon). It was a government broadcasting commission exposé, that sought to explain the physiological process of memory.

About a third of the way through the file, some camp German scientist had been proving a point about synapses and ganglia or some or other nonsense. And Blossom had been his guinea-pig.

“It’s difficult to go out of my house,” she said, blinking rhythmically. “When I met the guy, he was really, really funny,” (Chester loved this part), “and I love funny guys, but then he started kissing me and trying to touch me and I remember telling him ‘No, no!’”

“It’s basically an encounter with death,” the scientist narrated. “The nature of the traumatic memory is that it does not fade away. Because the imprint is strong, the memory remains as fresh as on the first day. In this scientific trial, the memory of her trauma, so deeply embedded in her brain, will be changed simply by taking a pill. A beta-blocker originally designed to treat raised heart-rates.”

She had taken the pill for two months, each time writing down her memory of ‘the event’ afterwards. And each time she had cried a little less; a little less enthusiastically.

She had been trying to erase him.

Today though, Chester would use the video in which he had seen her for the first time – the one which had caused him to fall in love – which, he was sure, happened to have been her début.

It had been a Casting, one of porn’s many manifestations; a subgenre. This Casting involved two seasoned males (with emblematic endowment) who ‘interviewed’ twenty-five blue-movie hopefuls. Most of the women, you could see, had already been tainted, and they performed with hyperbolic enthusiasm, as if merely in a different sort of pantomime. Most, Chester could tell, had done this many times before - their success sponsoring their subsistence.

Not Blossom. She had never made the big time (Chester would have known, which was never as big as any of them could have believed, before that first, definitive occasion they

were instilled with lube. Blossom was wonderfully detached, demurely startled at her best. That was, at least, when she began.

The girls had been told it was a casting. It was, in fact, a shoot, and they were not auditioning but acting, as they promptly found out (or had they already known?). They lined up and sucked off the two guys who looked bored (despite the prevailing evidence). This, the first staple stage of cinematic pornography: oral.

Blossom performed subtly. She caressed. Nothing special. If anything, she was too gentle, and she was pushed off her post almost immediately.

Then the men sat on the carpet. They leaned against the couch on which the girls would sit in turn, with their legs splayed as if on two rafts drifting apart. The men's tongues stuck out in-between, lashing about like those inflatable-tube flames you find outside second-hand car dealerships.

Chester skipped forward in the file to the part which still flooded him with desire. Here occurred something so unexpected that it had, the first time he had cursorily viewed it, caused him to freeze, to loosen his grip, to rewind and watch it again.

It occurred during the second stage. The troupe was now comprehensively nude, in all their shades, and there was very little hair to be seen between them (besides the unreal black and blond on their heads). Stage two was intercourse, unprotected, and the men remained where they were, patiently receiving each epileptic pelvis, which was all very expected and typical, as you might imagine.

But then the tattooed male abruptly stood up and walked over to where Blossom, with her natural lips and natural hair, was perched on the wide arm of the couch. He had seen her there, in recline like a Gauguin nude, her head on elbow, and had decided to rewrite the script.

She watched him walk over, looked him up and down, slightly bewildered, as if she was just a spectator, as if an audience member at the theatre, singled out by the actors. She watched as he slid into her from behind, into her neat, fortune-cookie cunt.

Then she looked at the camera. She looked at the camera like one might at that parent who had come to support a school gala, while the girl was taking a moment to assure herself that they were indeed spectating.

He arched in and out of her, his six-packed body pushing gently and rhythmically, and she looked at him and then at the other girls and her eyes had become glassy and her breathing rapid. She looked away and the man wrapped his hand around her jaw; made her watch.

She was enjoying it, and the incredible thing was that it seemed she had never considered that she might not, she had never considered that fucking could be anything but intimate.

The shot swung to the other coupling duo, who were aghast, totally enthralled by her pleasure. They were unbelieving, envious, as were all the girls touching themselves plainly behind the couch. They all watched her eyes moisten. They all became aroused. And this Casting did not make it to stage three (anal), because of Blossom. Because Blossom had reminded them of what they were doing.

This video was one-of-a-kind.

After climax: anticlimax. Chester Bosmans felt neither shame nor elation. The deed done, it all fled from his mind and he wondered briefly why she might have cast him as such a monster. She hadn't minded when Tattoo had unexpectedly entered her.

Chester wanted to contact her again. Maybe he would refresh her tampered memory.

Tokoloshe was outside the door. He scratched at it like an outcast puppy.

Chester opened up to find his grinning face and in his cupped hands, the right cigarettes, the correct generic pink roll of polony, a few coins.

“You're alright, Tokolosh,” Chester said, removing the items (including the change which he took, held for a second, and then placed ceremoniously against the little boy's palms).

The child said, “Whatever you want, boss”.

Chester shut the door, nipped off the roll's metal clip, and began brunch. He then called Buddy Kelly, set up a meeting for later in the day.

Sims was waiting to murder someone.

And the rumble was still deafening after all these days. After all these numberless days, which must, by now, have made up years.

All these months Sims had been confined to a single floor. All these months, with that horrendous rumble ringing in his ears. That rumble come from high above, from those churning metal gears, forever churning, suicidally churning.

And Sims was beginning to suspect that it was already too late: he had become a madman.

He wondered, if this was so, how he could have missed the non sequitur from the sentences sailing by behind his eyes. For Sims had an ear to the tapped wire in his mind, and what he had overhead had all seemed mundane, with a thought answering the one before and so on, each appropriately rational since gravity made sense, and colour, and the brutal sensitivity of people.

He glared at the hole. And this look, which had once been misted with blood-lust, was accompanied now by a triplet of wrinkles fanning by the corner of each eye, stretching back to his big ears. He looked to the square hole and although he was not angry, he could feel that his body was ready to thresh and flay, that it was set to dismember, come the time. And the cascade of thoughts was yet unbroken, and Sims registered how his hatred, once so vivid, had turned to a stuporous desperation. Surely this was lunacy, Sims thought, to coddle a vendetta with the initial grudge long since deposed; swept away by numberless, lingering winters.

The shaft was synthetic and sharp, as if laser-bored through the stacked concrete, with the trapped echoes of a people riding its thermals. He knew this cuboid of dim space plummeted a long way down. He knew it reached a long way up. For six soccer pitches he estimated it spanned; that's twelve Olympic sized swimming pools.

He watched the void and some newly honed part of him, precisely attuned to repeating things, measured the pitch of the growl. And he counted, moving his lips: three, two, one.

And just on time, the black weights that were bridled in steel brackets, appeared from the hole in the floor above and slid slowly down the four cables at the shaft's middle. These cables were as thick as a battleship's mooring ropes, and were the counterweight's inescapable track, spanning the plummet for eight jumbo jets end to end.

And Sims counted, the other way now, one, two, three ... the mass cruising like a tanker through the stuffy air ... sixty, sixty-one.

At two-hundred-and-eighty-seven, the counterweight had disappeared, and the four taut ropes, which had so gently lowered it, remained, easing by, as tight and sure as streaks of paint on the air. They slithered past; seemed to be only shimmering in the firelight.

Sims counted backwards – seven-thousand-seven-hundred-and-nineteen. Seven-thousand-seven-hundred-and-seventeen now – to the oscillating quartz in his head.

Sims had not been good with numbers in his former life. He had struggled with mathematics. For there seemed to be a fundamental concept he had failed to grasp, something to do with purpose.

His teachers would do things with x's and derivatives. They would demonstrate how you could go from that quadratic mess of symbols to this slightly different looking mess, now with the symbols on top of each other, a few disappearing along the way. And he had understood it in the instant, but then, he had been unable to recognise why the new expression was in any way better than the former. Maths, to Sims, felt like changing the rules of a game that you could never win, a game without any end conditions, which wasn't even fun to play.

In fact, Sims had never been much good at edification; not in literature, nor in science. But his pads and files had always ended up littered with doodles of women. Women in blue, red and black pen-ink. Women tall and slender, with tiny waists and long elegant feet, with thick lips and dainty noses, which he had inspected, altered, stashed away.

He glanced around the workbenches now and the faces were averted, their occupants diligent and mute. His cohabitants stared down to where their hands were busy, to where their fists were locked around metal rulers, hovering, scraping, to their callus-capped fingers darting down and off the timber work-surface like little beaks pinching crumbs. The furnaces splashed pigmented warmth about them as they worked, these fires always in fury during winter.

In front of Sims sat a considerable pile of little red beads. These beads were almost perfectly round, and their crimson membranes had the retroreflective glow of pomegranate berries.

Here, in Azania, it was his duty to sift through them all and look for spots of black in the domes of red. Once these black sheep had been isolated (and there were many: one in every hundred-and-eighty-six, he estimated), it was his obligation to comb them into a

considerable pile of their own, to then scrape this pile off the bench with his metal tool, into the unappeasable cavity which gaped up from the floor.

To perform this procedure was his function. This function was his punishment. Any thoughts he had of dissension were quashed by the threat of being cast out into the darkness. And before he would consider *that* hell, he first needed to murder a man in this one.

And so Sims dredged. Sims scraped away the rejects. He watched them hobble down and away on their journey through the unknowable twists of Azania's marble-run bowels, and it was always with a pang of grief, a paternal shudder, that he jettisoned these beads. He thought of them as the little eyes of little wooden monkeys.

Sims stood up and walked to the end of the row. All the muscles in his legs and across his knees were stiff for their inaction – they felt tight, like the eight sinews stretched across the storey's height.

He passed through the rows of benches crowded with his fellow dredgers at work, each person hunched over his pile of red beads.

After fifty-four steps, he turned ninety degrees to the right and walked to the end of that row and then walked back, eyeing the plunging shaft, pacing like a bear in a zoo, with the numbers still sounding off in his head. Sims was good with numbers now.

Seven-thousand-six-hundred-and-eighty-three. Seven-thousand-six-hundred-and-eighty-one exact durations until the platform would rise from the pit.

Mobile again, he caught the vermin smell of the place, a faint tang like rotting chicken, though there were seldom chickens here, dead or alive. It was the smell of personal industry, from scant sanitation Sims thought, the pong from an unbalanced diet, the musk from curdling skin.

He nodded to the man on the corner, his closest friend here in the tower. This man didn't speak much. God only knows from where he might have been plucked. The man nodded back.

Sims twirled on his heels and pulled up his cargo-pants from inside the pockets, imagining he might be discarding handfuls of sand from an escape tunnel he had been pawing out of the mountain. He could almost feel the granules spilling off his sandled feet, and he could have been performing an act of supplementary defecation, these tiny pellets brushing down his legs, although he didn't know if it had come to that.

The silent man wore a polo-neck jersey, which had once been navy blue, which had once belonged to Sims, once a piece of his city-life habit. It wasn't his anymore; it wasn't really anyone's, but the property of the teeming monolith, his new home and dungeon.

This jersey was now undergoing the slow process of recycling (along with its occupant), and Sims considered the domino-run of chance that had led this to be.

It could only be a coincidence that his old jersey was now draped like a dashiki over this mute man on the bench corner, hung on his nipples like canvas on nails. There were about 200 people scrounging through beads on this floor. They slept on the massive mattresses (which were like small lawns) spread out in the corners. And the weight took 287 seconds to pass between the floor and the pipe-vined ceiling, 12 hours to complete a full cycle (marked by when it passed again in the same direction). And so there must have been thousands. Thousands of bony jersey-mannequins. Eating. Shitting. Bathing with soap in one hand and cupped water in the other.

Sims wore someone else's clothes. He wore a grey top that had once had a cartoon figure embroidered in the centre – he could tell because its shape was less bleached than the rest. He had worked out that the shape was that of a boy with a disproportionately big head, who held a snowboard and a mug of beer. Sims also wore a vest, patched with stains he hoped were from spilt coffee. He wore someone else's cargo-pants, which were so fibrous that he thought them indestructible. Other than his faded jersey, he had not seen another of the many things that had once belonged to him.

His uninvolved relationship with the quiet man had begun when Sims had spied his ex-jersey and eyed its wearer threateningly. But when he saw the pale face lollipopped above it, its small-winged nose and pale eyes, his glare softened. The quiet man had seemed to smile minutely without exhibiting any joy. He had shrugged, showed he was still human – that he could smile despite being only earnestly sad. Sims knew this expression intimately.

He had taken his grading tool with him on his walk. The implement was like a metal ruler but without the stratifications, its edges sharpened on the regenerating skin of scabby hands over decades. He squeezed it tightly, eyed the shaft, and was sure it would sooner slice through the lamb-belly throat of an outlander than into his own toughened hand. The throat of a citizen of easy-circumstance, like he had been, as was the man he was waiting to murder.

In his former life, Sims had been a pharmacist. He had played soccer in a parking lot every Sunday at three o'clock. In that existence, he imagined himself a kind of loveable dote, as a virtual piñata in the minds of those who knew him. Heart of gold, head of stone Sims. And he had a kind face once. He used to smile on a whim and Sims knew how to love someone.

He stalked back and forth and a newly honed part of him clicked through the sequence of grabbing a man and slitting his soft throat. He had never performed the action

physically, but the choreography was already muscle memory, each metronomic contraction calibrated to the average diameter of the average outlander's neck.

Sims smiled at the mute man, not manically as you might expect, for the hatred had faded. It was a desperate smile now. The man held his ruler against the table, between lines of beads like cut coke, and as Sims watched he lifted his nipping hand and summoned him with a come-hither gesture.

This skinny individual was surrounded by other men and women who wore clothes which didn't belong to them, not in the outlander sense; trench-coats and collared shirts and cotton hoodies in the assorted colours of the visual spectrum.

He stooped by the man on the corner and the man pecked a bead from the timber work-surface and offered it to Sims. It had a camouflage-green spot in the dome of red, an imperfection he had never come across before, and as he reached to take it the man grabbed his shoulder and pulled him near his mouth and spoke into his ear in a whisper. "Sun is coming soon," he said. "The sun is coming."

Sims pulled away from the man's grasp, surprising himself with the force of pneumatic revulsion. Seven-thousand-four-hundred-and-twenty, he thought.

"What?" he hissed back. "What? I don't understand?"

The man had closed his hand around the anomalous bead. "Sun is coming," he said, almost to himself now, "Sun is coming," and then he turned back to his work.

Sims had heard snippets of the folklore of this place. He had heard of their gods and kings; of Aunt Nancy. This was Azania.

In his former life, Sims had been hesitantly religious. He had prayed every night to hedge his bets and because his supplications left him feeling surprisingly at peace. Although, he had only ever prayed for one thing with genuine devotion: it was a girl who always looked slightly sad, who was frightened by rain, and he had gotten her in the end. In the end of his former life he had acquired her – a strong testimonial for His existence – but then again, she was dead now. Then again, she was the reason he had ended up here. He thought of her pretty face, slightly gloomy. He had loved her exhaustively.

As he returned to his place, his fellow inmates regarded him with habitual disinterest. It was after all just another day. He looked to the shaft from which the elevator would rise. It was caged in a flimsy chain-link fence and the swing-gate was fully open. The guard, as usual, was nowhere to be seen.

Seven-thousand-six-hundred-and-one afterthoughts now.

He knew he loved her when she was alive. Wasn't that a rare thing? He had loved her when he was with her. He had thanked chance, fate, God, whatever nameless knot held

the web just so. But she had been taken from him, taken from the world. And it was the fault of a single man, the man he waiting to murder. This man would be coming soon. He must, before Sims drove himself mad, rummaging through all time in his new life.

The rumble continued to hurtle down the hoistway, still to pinball off all the cold angles of his prison.

The Mosca was in part a novelty diner. The other part was a crappy video arcade. It had a slanted wooden roof like a squash court and, in fact, that's exactly what it had once been.

The Mosca was three squash courts conspicuously joined in chessboard felt, with the two partitions now humps down its length, which you couldn't help tripping over because it was so dingy in there.

There were a few old coke bottles in a pyramid behind the bar. There were a couple of pop-art prints mounted on one of the walls. These grandiose decorations were supplemented by the psychedelic bulbs of pinball machines and shoot-em-ups games. Aside from a single purple bulb over the bar, the only other illumination came from these machines, which were mostly niggardly with the activation of their stroboscopic lights, which seemed only to get excited when kiddies were bashing their buttons – this wasn't happening a great deal at the moment.

Thank God for the 200:1 scale fibreglass fly hanging from the ceiling, thank God the walls were so bland and white, else you might have thought it was do-do time at the crèche.

And, to top it all off, there was that fat guy trying to impress his long-nosed tart, with his slick, back-foot slide, with his emphatic twist of the wrist, who had just slung a plastic ball into the net at the motion-sensored tenpin.

It truly was a tremendous shithole.

Chester Bosmans had come early and forked out for some tokens, which now sat in a considerable pile on the shitty table in front of him. This table, whose linoleum ruse was peeling off, was a constituent part of a plush red booth, which smelt fake and felt fake and was in the middle of the room.

Earlier, Chester had played some 'Whack-a-croc' because he liked the digital 'Ow!' sounds that the green stapler heads gave off when he pounded their mouths shut – their yelps raising a semi-tone when they got really angry and came at you in hyperdrive. He had won a few tickets at the crocs, but never mind that there wasn't even a single skirt on roller-skates balancing milkshakes up against the smiley-face badge tacked to her cleavage, this place didn't even have a god-damned prize stall. And he had bought all these tokens, but lost the urge to use them shortly after the sponge hammer had detached itself from the croc machine.

He sat in the booth, considered for a moment the strip-poker box by the bar, but that took real money, and he had better be careful because he didn't have much of that left.

So to occupy himself, Chester gripped the back of his bench and slid his head around to observe the tool performing at the bowling machine. Did this guy know that there was a bowling alley, a real bowling alley (granted somewhat shitty), *literally* next door? Chester mused over this phenomenon – that bowling alleys and arcades seemed to go together – and concluded that it must be because they both left your hands gunky with fingerprints, like the throat of an ex-virgin after a Viking raid.

The tart looked like an opera singer, so artistic was her make-up, so stump-like was her neck.

The fat guy threw the ball and managed to hit the net half-a-metre in front of him despite his seizure of flourish, and all three watched as the isometric ball skated down the right side of the crude 3D alley on the screen. It was teetering right on the lip of the gutter, rattling towards the pins (which were arranged in the 'mule ears' – when 7 and 10 are the only two that remain) and the real ball was long since in the net. On screen, the crude sphere struck the 10 skittle, which flung into the air and bounced off the invisible roof of the alley, and landed on the remaining one.

Extremely realistic that, thought Chester, shaking his head dolefully at the man, who was shooting off rounds from his hands as if they were six-shooters, now blowing away the smoke. This was too much, even for Chester, who was, by the way, in one of his better moods. The bowler was making fat people look bad.

“Very clever shot,” Chester said so that the simp and his kiwi bird would hear.

The tart stopped her soundless clapping but the guy fobbed off his gibe with a dismissive gesture (his hands, apparently, no longer revolvers).

“You're very good by the way,” Chester said. “I would be proud if I was you.”

The lady gave him a poisonous look, which was a start, but just then Buddy Kelly slid into the booth opposite him.

“Sorry I'm a bit late,” he said.

Truthfully, Chester did not mind that he was a bit late (he hadn't actually noticed), but was slightly concerned that he almost liked this affable young man, despite his good manners.

“You just saved a man's life,” said Chester earnestly.

“Oh,” Buddy Kelly said, “well ... excellent. I hope he was worth the trouble.”

“Not even close.”

Chester ordered some buttered popcorn – house speciality – and Buddy Kelly not only fetched the bowl from the bar, but he offered to pay for it. All this, even before Chester had explained him the rules: when you met with Chester, you filled his giant-baby fists with foodstuffs as payment for his time.

Upon the popcorn's arrival, Chester began annihilating choked handfuls of it like a woodchipper on soft pine, with all the spluttering debris of salt and kernel and clumps of butter. But he paused midway, in a rare gesture of generosity, which Buddy Kelly, picking only a few pieces from the bowl as it contained a selection of the world's finest white truffles, failed to exploit. Chester eyed him sceptically, continued in grunting it all into his ample stomach, and he smacked his lips and sort of groaned with mundane delight amongst it all.

Crème soda and a *Mega* to wash it down. Chester liked that the drink was green like cartoon toxic waste – another tamer of his many fetishes. He also liked that it was mostly sugar.

“You want a cigar?” Chester said. “Hey, Bar-slave! Cigars? How much?”

The barman looked about twelve and had most certainly been the runt of the litter. He had patchy hair, a ratty goatee and eyes that were too close together.

“Cherry or Lime?” he asked. His voice hadn't yet broken; it was almost there but not quite.

“Those are my options?” Chester said. “I feel stupid now for even asking. You have made me feel stupid.”

The barman shrugged.

“Cherry,” said Chester, “How much?”

“Fifty bucks.”

“And the lime?”

“Fifty.”

“You mean they cost the same?”

The barman nodded – he was making inbreds look bad.

“How many tokens is that?” Chester asked.

“You can't pay in tokens.”

“You got twenty Buddy? I could do with a cigar.”

“That entitles me to half,” Buddy Kelly said.

“Fair enough,” Chester said. “Go fetch it for us would you? Else I strangle the half-breed. Lime. No, wait, cherry.”

“We're out of cherry,” chimed in the barman and Chester slapped his forehead.

The cigar was pitiful and sweet, which was a real tragedy because it meant that Chester's frugality was not working out terribly well. Chester let Buddy Kelly start it off, and he allowed him a few puffs here and there (although he became less keen as it became shorter, his skin paler). When it was done Chester stumped it out with disgust and lit a cigarette.

"This is a real premium joint," Buddy Kelly said, observing the centres of Chester's Wayfarers steadily – the thin man's gaze aimed just above his actual eyes. His sentence had started whole but seemed to croak and succumb to trembling near its end. But at least he had a sense of humour, Chester thought. The space was hot and the arcade beeped and sired with lackluster, as if even the games weren't entirely convinced by their attractiveness.

"This is the Mosca," Chester said, pointing out the fibreglass fly, in case Buddy hadn't noticed. And just then the duke-box piped up; a song from the original motion-picture soundtrack of *Titanic* – the kiwi bird was responsible.

"I love this song. I don't know why I've never come here before," Buddy Kelly said, a little too excitedly now, to which Chester responded with a cynical smile.

"What's the tattoo?" the well-meaning man asked, pointing to the string of calligraphic letters running down the big man's forearm: *WWJMPANFED*.

"It's kind of embarrassing," Chester said, pleased he had noticed. "What's your take on religion?"

"I don't really subscribe to any ..." said Buddy, "I mean ... what about you?"

"What would Jesus most probably absolutely not fucking ever do?" he said.

"Ah," said Buddy Kelly. "Probably get that tattoo."

"Exactly."

Chester decided it was time to get down to business.

"So, listen," he said, "you remember what I was saying, how I thought you were wasting your time behind a screen all day? Well, I meant it. Frankly I think you're overqualified. And I like you Buddy, I can't quite put my finger on why, but I do."

"That's nice of you to say --"

"And me and old Bill Brussel go way back. I didn't mention your name, just probed about to see if there were any unfilled positions, nothing incriminating. And it turns out there's this Trade Ministry spot which they're looking for someone to fill. Involves PR, your kind of thing. Travel. Big promotion."

Chester paused. He waited for Buddy Kelly to air his thoughts – Chester was looking forward to this next part, to beholding the transparent expression on Buddy's soft face, and he wanted him ready.

“That sounds pretty interesting but, I'm not sure.”

“It's for you! I can see it,” Chester said. “Bill mentioned something about them needing a new rep. to head over to an affiliate company in that Azania place.”

Buddy Kelly's thick eyebrows minutely rose, his pronounced lips frowned ever so slightly. This was not the drama Chester had hoped for.

“That's incredible,” said Buddy Kelly after a moment, his gratitude now sparkling in points around his eyes, “that's exactly where I wanted to go.”

“Well, if you want it. Maybe put in some extra effort over the next while.”

After Buddy had left, Chester looked over his shoulder and the twat was still courting the cunt over at the bowling machine, still lampooning like he didn't know he was an embarrassment to the miracle of life on the now disgraced planet.

Chester scooped the tokens up into his right hand, thought for a moment while rubbing his dimpled chin. Happy that it was a sound investment, he hurtled the whole crusty lot – quite weakly admittedly – at the couple so that at least one token struck the man's swished-back shoe. And, yes, the guy was wearing bowling shoes. This was good, for it meant that Chester, unsure at first, finally had his justification. As he strolled over to them he paused by the 'Whack-a-croc' to collect the sponge-hammer with which, to the wonderful, brash notes of the bird's aria, he proceeded to beat the poser unconscious.

19. A Gurney In The Waiting-hall

Tina Lark sat up very straight. She sat in one of four foldable chairs positioned around her precious pine dining-table, which was yellow-washed and round and in the centre of her kitchen. Not that it was *really* valuable, not in a monetary sense, but she loved that through its thin mustard coat she could see the arching veins of the wood, that it could be cleaned with a single swipe of a cloth, and she liked that it was light but sturdy, easy to manoeuvre around.

She sat twirling a length of the phone cord around and around with her index finger, and was not really into the conversion today. The cord, strung from the phone, which was fixed to the wall by her pink whistle-kettle, was hanging limply, just off the ground, with a good half a metre bandaged over her wrist and webbed through her fingers. Its length was perhaps overindulgent, she had come to realise, perhaps marginally too long, considering the modest dimensions of her abode.

The coiled plastic could reach the raised deck where her bed was without even elongating. It could easily be extended to the divan by her desk – she'd rest it on a chair so the creamy skin wouldn't drag along the floor. It could even, at a stretch, reach the clothesline by the ceramic fountain and the lemon tree outside. It was one of her very favourite things in the quaint little cottage (along with the sunflower-yellow kitchen cupboards), because it allowed her to advise and console her friends and family over the phone whilst doing just about anything, just like when she had been a girl, managing the endlessly discussable unfoldings of adolescence.

For now, Tina Lark concentrated hard. She closed her eyes, tried to imagine what it must be like to be desperate, to be feeling hopeless and alone. She sat up straight. The muscular core beyond her flat stomach was hardened, her glutes too, well used to resisting the aching temptations which led away from rectitude and down an easy road to bad posture.

“It's just been a really tough day,” she said to Dikobo, opening her eyes, again all the primary colours of the neat, clean pieces of her cottage cheerily surrounding her. “My boyfriend just left me and I don't know if ... how I can go on.”

She wrapped the cord around her long straight neck, three loops. She rolled her eyes as if the noose were taut. Is that what happened when your neck snapped?, she thought frivolously, were your eyes reduced to whites?

“I have no one left,” she said, forcing anguish into her face, troubled vacillation into her tone. “I gave him everything, my heart, he was my life and he's in love with someone else. Do you have any idea what that's like?”

She realised she was sounding feeble; she was a bad actress at the best of times, too sincere a person for the stage. “I lost my job, too, just last week,” she added casually.

It's not that Tina Lark was incapable of empathy, indeed, she believed wholeheartedly that quite the opposite was true. She cared very much about the predicaments of the less fortunate. She was very compassionate (quiet but compassionate), others would tell you. It's just that her mind wouldn't focus today – it was somewhere else.

Dikobo was running through the motions, quite sincerely considering her pithy enthusiasm, telling her calmly that it must be terrible. He was doing a good job, too. For, when you related, you must never undervalue the gravitas of the other's situation, never sugar-coat. He was trying to explain that things get better, hearts invariably heal, there is always hope. Listening. Things always seem better – this was the keystone of the process – after someone else hears you say them aloud. Tell me more he was saying.

It was about then, when Tina was beginning to wonder how she could possibly get through another twenty minutes of slovenly misery, another twenty minutes of Dikobo's annoyingly attentive support (bless him for his effort), that the doorbell, like two thrilled birds exchanging sweet-nothings, chirped from the bell by the yellow front door.

She stood up to look out of the round, crossed window, down the brick-work driveway to the main gate. She clamped the phone receiver between ear and shoulder, out of which came Dikobo's concerned voice.

The figure at the gate was slim and, even from this distance, looked minutely wan. He was not standing up fully straight, had short black hair and dark eyes within dark rings. It was him – it was Buddy Kelly.

A fluttering rose from behind her breasts up along her long soft neck, her smooth throat, into her mouth; faerie wings.

“Dikobo?” she said rummaging through high-lighters and rainbow post-its on the small desk until she found her keys, sounding suddenly disencumbered. “Dikobo I'm really sorry but I have to go now. Like *now*. Someone's outside.”

The telephonist, bless him for his earnestness, thought she was faking, attempting to appease him so she could hang up and proceed to kill herself – as some did, or so she had been taught. When they transformed, one moment broken and the next miraculously happy, all their inescapable grief shed like scraps of skin, with *that* solution, once so unthinkable, then suddenly obvious, so liberatingly clear. He thought she was testing him;

“Who is it that has arrived?” he was saying. “Where do you need to go? Can you call me afterwards, please? Can I speak to them?”

“Dikobo, I am going to drown myself in the bath, but listen, everybody agrees it is for the best and I'll donate my body to science,” she said, pressing the gate remote.

Dikobo was now barking at her, not amused at all. She then felt bad – she had mocked the afflicted, the weak – and she marked the moment. She would put it in the back of her mind for later, for repentance later, but for right now there was a visitor in a white hoody perambulating awkwardly down the driveway, the very same man who had been occupying her thoughts recently, the essence of whom had been stoking her sunken, ever-burning optimism of late.

He was outside the front door but did not knock.

“Dikobo,” she trailed the cord like a microphone cable to the sun-decorated welcome mat. “Seriously, I'll call you later.” She opened the top half of the door, phone on shoulder. “Okay, yes I know, I'll speak to you later,” she said and hung up, smiling at Buddy Kelly.

“Hi Tina,” he said, his top half framed nicely, the white-blossomed garden trickling behind. And he smiled too, with his enviable lips and also with his glossy eyes, the plump crescent folds underneath them accentuating as his cheeks gathered up at his high cheekbones. A not so unpleasant countenance to behold, his forehead crinkling; an impression that was strangely, shyly bold.

“The terrible twosome,” he said, “the Behrs, seem to be out or something. Been trying them all day.”

“Please come in,” she said, unlatching the door's lower half. “They visit their mother on Sundays. Come in, welcome to my little cottage. Have you met Atticus and Boo?”

She motioned gracefully to a purple roofed cage on the sill by the sink, in which two fire-finches hopped and cheeped, up and down on a dowel-stick across its middle, up and down, their heads clicking around, their clipped wings vibrating in a purring blur.

“It's pathetic, I know,” she said, “but they're sweet enough. Scout met an untimely, rather messy end when Ears knocked the cage over – she's my cat – and ... anyway, so Boo is new.”

“That's not how the story goes. I don't remember any one dying in the end?” Buddy Kelly said, remembering the book (which was outside of the curriculum but which his mother had insisted he read), his voice higher as he spoke now than whenat his most confident, “They'll have to rewrite it.”

“Ja, my animals are all from the shelter,” she announced rather brazenly, looking down as if to conceal her shameful modesty. “Ears is deaf and the finches were abandoned. I have a thing for useless animals. Otherwise I have no one to talk to.”

She pulled out a dainty, wicker-caned chair for Buddy and went over to the kettle and replaced the phone, hanging the cord in hosepipe coils around it.

“You let in any old stray, hey? With open arms?” said Buddy Kelly.

She laughed, so easily. She laughed like a young princess. Her relaxed black hair was rich and smooth and fell to her shoulders where it forked like a stream down either side of a white and turquoise-stitched paisley top.

It was a nice coincidence that she happened to be wearing her amber earrings and her tan corduroy pants for this surprise visit. The pants were tight across her legs and groin, almost as if moulded around her, and they hoisted up her bum and rounded it ever so slightly, and she wondered if his eyes were focused there now as she stretched on her toes to reach for the tea.

“Okay,” she said, “so you're going to try some of this vanilla tea with me. I collect tea too ... as well as strays.”

“Gladly,” he said, visibly relaxing. “By the way, where do you keep the bodies?”

She slung her head around sharply to look at him, for a second confused.

“You do realise,” Buddy said playfully, “there's a massive sign on the side of your house that says 'Coroner's office', with a big arrow pointing towards your door? I know. I was surprised too.”

Tina turned back to the tea cupboard (all flavours imaginable stacked in little colourful boxes).

“Oh, yes,” she said. “I keep them in the fridge. And under the bed before I cut them up.” She laughed again. “The woman who owns the main house put that up – she's from Bosnia or something. She thought the sign would be a good idea to deter criminals. Bizarre I know.”

“That's pretty creepy, but could work,” said Buddy Kelly, “unless they're body-snatchers.”

It was a balmy afternoon and a faint breeze brushed past the Indian curtains with their rich thread-work, with bits of mirror laced into the hem. The breeze coaxed the wind-chimes into tinkling delicately, one made of scythe-shaped rainbow glass, another of hollow jade.

Buddy Kelly noticed the high alcove where the bed was, just below the star-studded ceiling. He noticed the steep stairs, almost a ladder, which had a different pair of shoes on each rung. The stilettos from the Friday they went to Sliver, on the topmost.

There were bloated satin cushions of green and blue on a divan by a small desk. There were colourful lists in foolscap, written in neat, consistent cursive, presticked to the walls. And pots of lavender and daisies sat on straw mats on a bookshelf, between a select few books and assorted bric-a-brac. On the shelf top was a carved crucifix complete with an intricate rendition of the long-suffering saviour, his bleeding red palms, and hand-painted sculptures of the virgin. All in all, the place had an organised yet quirky personality, which was calming, soothing, but also bubbly and regimented, just the way Tina Lark had fashioned it around herself.

“So, what is it exactly that I did?” Buddy Kelly asked, “besides make a fool of myself the other night? You guys still haven't told me. Why I'm ... famous?”

“I wouldn't worry about it. Getting drunk I mean. Same thing happens to all of us,” Tina said, again implementing her life-line training. “That other thing? Well, it's quite silly, actually. Stupid boys as usual. They're incorrigible! Basically, whenever someone locks their keys in their room – which Squig is notorious for doing – Michael – you've met him? – has to go upstairs and open up with the skeleton key.”

“And I interrupted him? Stopped him from going up?”

“Ja, pretty much. So they could copy the key. 'Cause the thing is, apparently the boys woke up one night and he was standing there in the room watching them sleep!”

“You're joking?” Buddy said.

“No. Wish I was. So they've got some scheme to remove all his furniture when he's out.”

“Payback,” said Buddy.

“Ja. Some people are just weird.”

“Tina,” Buddy Kelly said while fidgeting with a little wire tree with stones of crystal for fruit, “I just popped in to let you know, I'll be leaving town for a few days. As I said, Zander and Squig were out, and I haven't told them yet. If you could pass it on?”

“Okay sure,” she said offering him a biscuit, feeling a rush of excitement for his manners. “Where are you going?”

“Well, I'm going on a business trip,” he said and then, with mock authority: “for the UP Trade Ministry”.

She returned with the tea and he sipped it, wrestling to hold a straight face for it was mightily sweet. He looked at her, down at his milky brew, wondered if he was going to tell

her. He wondered if he had really come all the way here just to tell her. He decided: even if he hadn't, he would.

“And, well,” he continued, “I happen to be going to the place ... see I believe that my father is living there at the moment. Azania. You heard of it?”

She was watching him intently and, unlike her visitor, had no problem in holding the eye of another, no reason she could fathom for her composure to stammer.

“I have, vaguely,” she said, “long ago, but I can't remember anything except for the name.”

“Well, that's it. I don't even know where it is, not exactly.”

Buddy Kelly felt faintly embarrassed. He had looked it up, the mysterious name, and his investigation had yielded little but for the glaring fact that the place had a mythos, which veiled any significant quantity of undisputed information. Even in the database, where citizens confidently learned of the great stories of history, where man's triumph over the capricious universe was presented in tidy, sectioned paragraphs, even in that centralised compendium of all acquired and refined knowledge, there was very little to go on. No more than: ‘Azania is the name that has, at various times, been applied to various parts of sub-Saharan Africa’. As a place in contemporary times, it seemed to be without coordinates.

“He's missing?” she asked, while thinking: perhaps this boy is more damaged than I imagined. She softened her eyes to match his, noticed the curly black down below his smallish ears. She smiled sympathetically. She wanted to kiss him. “Do you want to tell me about it?” she said and was immediately irritated with herself for sounding like a textbook psychologist.

She had just fobbed off Dikobo (their weekly life-line simulation) and now this fragile man was wanting to divulge, to disclose, and she really *did* care, in this instance, she really did want to listen, but she had sounded like a shrink with an eye on the clock. And she was moved that he had trusted her enough. It was another premise in that argument for her approachability, her aura of mercy.

“Well, he left us. A few years ago,” he said and seemed to withdraw, to retreat behind the glazing of his eyes. “But we've had no word so I don't fucking know what he's doing there. But this thing came up at work. So, I'm off on a little adventure. That's really about it. Don't tell anyone, okay?”

Tina Lark did not know why (it was not like her at all), but she suddenly felt a sadness creep into her bones. She blinked back a welling moistness – not for him, no, not for him. She felt sad inside, for herself, and she had a cursory glance around her tiny house for it

would surely reassure her, but all she saw were stupid, soulless things, cold and miserable, and what an effort it was to perk them up every day, to arrange and water and polish them into colour so they could sit evenly-spaced around her, little things, always one within reach, but they were dead and indifferent.

Tina Lark was a listener. She would always listen and never complain. When people said rude things about God and the Son she would bear it graciously. When they told their sinful anecdotes she would endure it, and its not that she was feigning resilience, indeed, it was because it did not bother her, because she knew she was above them. She knew that God favoured her and that is why she was kind, that is why she was able to understand, able to listen to people being derisive and cynical for hours on end and not interrupt. She was good and seldom sad, but she remembered something sad now.

“Buddy, can I tell you something?” she said softly, staring into the saccharine tea.

“Of course.”

“When I was a child ... we were a well-off family,” she looked into his obliging eyes, at the unsure beginnings of an innocuous smile in his eyes, at a seed of fragility in the corner of his attractive mouth. “We had a big house. And we had a maid, her name was Martha, who practically grew us up. She was like a second mother to me. And she was really smart, like very clever, but she had no education at all. Her English was good because she tried very hard. I don't know why I'm telling you this.”

He had an adorable face. It had a natural melancholy which was, like his sharp jaw (which seemed, when he leaned back like that, to fuse into his neck), balanced out: the jaw by the dark texture of the stubble on his chin and below his nose; by the darkness of his eyes; the other, by an intensely benign assertiveness, a surety.

“When I said some words,” she continued, and although it was not like her, what she wanted to say was strangely vivid when she looked at him. It came out and she did not want to resist it, “not big words, but things like ... like 'suite', you know, difficult words. She would ask me to write them down for her on a little pad and she would write the same word underneath mine, in this handwriting like a small child's, with the 'e's, you know, sometimes upside down or the letter starting from the tail instead of the ring.”

She had started to incorporate her hands into her story, which had been clasping each other as if in prayer, as if a support beam to her perpendicular back. They now twirled and shaped words the in the air like bubbles, to be set free to drift and pop against the interesting edges of all her room's trinkets.

“She was like forty and quite fat, but it suited her, and she was gentle and had a large smile. All gums, you know, and mostly false teeth and she would practise her English on

me and eventually use the words on my parents. She called them 'Master' and 'Madam' and eventually she used the words on them because we were all very good to her and she wouldn't want to make a mistake. They said she must call them by their names but she wouldn't, almost, like she really believed they deserved the veneration. We were really good to her Buddy.”

He was watching her closely, elbows on the table, sipping squeamishly from the wide-brimmed polka-dot mug.

She looked at him, how he was hunched, imagined his curved spine and noticed that her own shoulders had been slowly creeping forward. She bolted upright.

“It sounds like you were,” he said, not carelessly, not shocked nor bored. “It sounds like she was part of the family.”

“She was!” Tina said, “She was. She talked to me when I came home from school, while she was ironing, about her home, her three children who were failing at what sounded like a joke of a school. Her daughter pregnant at 16. She said she was heart-broken, but, and it took a lot for her to admit this, but she said that her eldest was involved in crime.

“And she said we were so wonderful, so kind to her, that I was wonderful and beautiful and special and she thanked God and asked him to keep us safe. And I think she must have wondered – my parents are both doctors – I think she must have puzzled over what her life might have been like if she was born into our money, into our skin. And we could see when something bad had happened, because she would still try act gregarious and make clever jokes. But we could see, and sometimes she would break down, when her nephew was murdered with an axe, when her house's roof collapsed, we could see she was distraught. We talked about God too. She was religious. Her father, Joseph, was a preacher, and we talked about the stories from the New Testament.

“But the thing is,” she said and felt the prick of gloom again, “she was a real leader in her community. People looked up to her because she had done so well. She was respected for being wise, for having a good, successful family – ours, that is – and she chaired the domestic worker committee and the crime-watch group. People came to her for advice, you know, and she was a strong proud woman. She ...” she stopped briefly to smile wistfully, “she also cooked damn well and would share her much coveted chocolate cake recipe with the other maids.” Tina laughed, then her voice subdued, “I don't want to bore you? I haven't told anyone this story.”

Buddy was listening and yes, it felt good, the release. His face held a lopsided smile, which was sheepish but at the same time encouraging, his rogue left eyebrow (like a

calligraphy stroke) contorting affectionately. He shook his head thoroughly as if to say: it's okay. He listened.

“And then Buddy, something happened, a miracle. Because she was over forty and had had a sterilisation op., a tubal ligation, but they hadn't done it right or something, at the hospital they messed it up. So she got pregnant like ... almost like ...” She looked over to the bookshelf.

“Mary?”

“Ja, sort of inexplicably. And you don't know how happy this made her, Buddy. And all of us! We discussed names – ultimately she settled on Maria or Joseph – and she had never been so happy, do you know why? Because my parents said that they would give the child opportunities, that it could stay with her at the house, and they would send it to a good school, buy her – as it turned out she was a girl – buy her uniforms, books, my father would drive her there in the mornings on his way to work until she was old enough to travel alone, everything, Buddy. *Everything*. I can't tell you how happy this made Martha. She ... *she*.”

Tina started to cry. He had not expected it. She sniffed and cried and her pretty face became wet with runnels and brooks, a web of dribbling tributaries, and her pretty eyes were reddened by this tide of sorrow finally drawn out of her, and she thought impulsively amidst the torrent: I wish the landlord would fix the fucking shower so it wouldn't flood my cottage every other day.

Buddy Kelly stood up and walked around the table to her. He stepped onto her cherished rug, with its concentric circles of different colours converging at a bright yellow dot. He bent over and hugged her, hugged her straight shoulders and her head in a rather awkward embrace and, not knowing if it was satisfactory – it was all bones, not soft at all – he sat down in the chair next to her.

“And all her hopes for something better,” she gave out quiet sobs between the phrases, “all the dreams she had been denied in her own life, of succeeding, of amounting to her potential because of a stupid accident of birth, they were growing in her tummy, in that *baby*, they were all in that baby! That it might ... grow up to be like us.”

Tina turned her head to him and slowly eddied her lips between his. How soft they were! How delicate, she thought, an *éclair*. She held his bottom lip between her own in a grip ephemeral, as if it were meringue, which if pressed any harder would crumble, he would crumble away. But she felt a pulse, a spongy ache by her core and enclosed his beautiful full lips hard and then their mouths were parted and she was kissing him hungrily.

Buddy Kelly moved his long slender fingers and put them, not on her leg, not around the back of her soft straight neck, but on the table. He mumbled something into her mouth and drew away from her.

“Tina,” he said, his tone lower now, “what happened?”

She touched her mouth lightly, “What happened? Well ... Maria was born,” she said trancelike. “She was born on a gurney in the waiting-hall. And we could see straight away that something was wrong with her.” She wiped her eyes, and he, his cheek. “She had some syndrome, some rare syndrome because of all the wrong conditions. The little girl was practically blind and, well, she learned to walk at about seven years. If you ask her how old she is, she sometimes still says six, more like 'seeth' because, well, she has a lisp too. It took her so long to learn. By the time she could say the number of her age it was already wrong. Even now that she's thirteen, I think she still says 'nine'.”

“That's ... that's a little funny,” said Buddy Kelly cautiously.

Tina gave a vanquished, soppy laugh. “I guess it is. Except that Martha was hard on her. She tried to love her, but she was strict, more angry than I ever knew her capable of being. And Maria, though she didn't know much about the world, couldn't count or name colours, the one clue of her sentience, the one hint at the fact that she was a human, was that she seemed able to feel guilt. Guilt for her inadequacy, guilt every time she didn't know what to say or do, which was pretty much all the time. Until she even lost that carefree innocence. It's not really fair is it? They tried for miracles at all the churches. I had thoughts of murder, Buddy, I thought of pushing her into the swimming pool.”

Buddy Kelly took her hand, swaddled it in his own.

“But she's at a special school. They stuck to their promise, my parents. And so they struggle on together. They're quite a pair,” she smiled meekly and even though she knew herself wicked, constantly exaggerated her own purity and the scant results of her selfish kindness. Had she not, in feeling so awful for someone else, behaved in a way which demonstrated it was real, in front of a mortal witness?

“I think the other maids admire her for her bravery and her strength. So things didn't get easier but she's ploughing forward. I guess that's just how it is for some people. Test after test. Trials and tribulations.”

“Mysterious ways,” said Buddy Kelly ponderously, his eyes roaming around the room as if trailing a holy ghost. This made her blub out a laugh again, although he hadn't meant to be funny.

“Would you like some more tea?” she said feeling minutely refreshed, and as she stood up, she brushed the back of her fingers against his face.

“I can't,” he said, “I've got to head out soon. Need to pack. I'm sorry about that little girl. We must hit the streets, again, when I get back.”

“Oh,” she said, putting back down the plate of almond biscuits, “of course.”

Tina's tears had aroused him. The wetness, the saltiness that ran over her fine thin lips, over his; the wetness of her shy tongue. Her vulnerability had aroused him, the aftermath of her tears, her running make-up. But he did not love her. Not then. And for some reason, though he could not formulate his reasons in an argument, he did not want to love her either.

Buddy Kelly stayed a while longer and Tina Lark did not expect him to kiss her again. She thought, sometimes the universe names itself, reminds you that things are just the way they are. And she pledged to herself before the Holy Trinity, rearranging the crystal tree, spreading blossoms from the roses outside around its base, to never show weakness again.

Before Buddy Kelly and his mother moved into Spear Hall, he had been meticulously depressed, although his condition remained undiagnosed.

He had had so many reasons for his languor. A few were monumentally trivial, working to sustain the gloom in his shifty eyes. And some other reasons, some others that had scarified, those that, on occasion, he would effortlessly blame on bad parentage.

But in truth, he didn't believe his upbringing to have been heavy-handed – although human clay is a delicate stuff. And of course there was this: his little sister had died. She had almost reached her 23rd year. And his father had abandoned him.

He had denied this all like it was mortality: between thinking about it. But inside of him it was like a cancer. Before Buddy Kelly moved into Spear Hall, he had surrendered.

But within those two short weeks in Umzimbeet street, he found that his despondency showed similar symptoms to the coming-of-age cynicism of his new-found friends: the Behrs, Tina, JC.

He found they shared a feeling that their apathy was justified. They shared a faith that it was their right to cough gutturally in public, to spread their infectious disillusionment. Amongst these youths, Buddy Kelly would often experience a serendipitous wonder, when one of them would repeat one of his unvoiced thoughts back to him. He felt they shared a common sense.

They all seemed to agree that something was wrong with the Dalphiney life; that something had been lost (“Not like a sock,” Squig would say). They agreed that something had been misplaced, in a crowd of circumstance. Something sacred, although they couldn't quite put their finger on it, but they all agreed that it was unidentifiable because of their immersion in the hard city life. They figured it as a nameless cultural quirk, which would seem dignified and endearing in reminiscence. A chastity. A piety. Like the integrity of Genghis Khan. Perhaps not all lost, but changed.

This was how they felt; somehow culpable for being alive. All except Tina, who kept her Devotion close to heart, who smiled encouraging tolerance.

When they gathered in the Behrs' room to drink coffee or cane, enveloped in couches and adventitious music, they all argued vigorously and out loud, against the voices in their heads, which insisted life was a gift. And Tina remained demure because she believed the voice in hers and loved so much her anthropomorphic guardian, until Squig, in his nasal

drone, would loose into the after-silence of a strenuous discussion, “You know, it’s all too lucky.”

Then Tina's eyes would fill with glitter and she'd nod like a mother expecting the second word.

They all just wanted something to do. They laughed a lot because, although they theorised tirelessly about the uselessness of life, they all really knew what it was about. And this veiled hope diffused into Buddy Kelly's bones and the prospects of Azania began to enchant him. Azania seemed to call him, to somehow promise to make him whole.

And every night Buddy Kelly would be summoned by the heroine in his dreams. This girl who was quiet but not shy, who was saddened by her beauty, by the size of her breasts. They would garner the attention of men, a praise and awe she did not want for such a gross incident of time and chemistry.

In the fog of dream her eyes were colourless, but her eyelashes must have been long and dark, and behind it was raining, fizzing then light, again and again, the colour of a stormy sea.

She didn't want to dance unless it was a friend's birthday or wedding or unless they danced for themselves and watched each other's eyes, her lips frozen a reluctant second from bursting into laughter, poised on the edge during these happy moments, but they never did. Her hairline ran deep and high on her temples, and her hair grew fast and she liked to keep it long. She liked to listen when he talked of the world and she would flinch when he told her she was wonderful.

She was saddened by the enthusiasm of time, its determination to erode everything. She was saddened by the certainty of emotion. Her lips, always poised on the brink of a smile and across her eyes was an inconsolable shimmer, not from fear, nor regret, but from the force of wonder and disbelief, for what we are and how we choose to ignore it. Behind was the veil of gliding rain, softly breaking drops, hard and then soft. This sleeping pill dream.

It was late in the afternoon when Buddy Kelly said goodbye to his mother. The flat was starting to feel like home.

There was a slight crispness in the air, and Catherine Kelly was wearing her sheep skin slippers. She was wearing a black halter top and black pants and was nursing her gin. Looking rather elegant in spite of the footwear.

“I'm off,” Buddy Kelly said, thinking suddenly: that's what the salesman used to say.

Buddy had packed a leather satchel with a few things: toiletries, some casual clothes, underwear and the pills. He had shaved his light covering of facial hair and was wearing his dark blue suit for his meeting with Bill before leaving. He also decided to take along

his father's old newsboy cap, with the button on its top and its zigzagging stripes of grey and black.

She looked at him calmly. She had a strength in her bearing today.

“When will you come back?” she said.

“Not too long. You'll be okay?”

“I'll be fine, Buddy,” she said, and then after a moment, “Was the letter from him?”

“It might have been.”

“You know, I'll miss you.”

Buddy Kelly smiled.

“You know it's not your fault,” she said.

“What's not my fault?”

“None of it.”

“We'll see,” he said.

She did not cry; this was Catherine Kelly, a final glimpse. Her strength. Did she know she would never see him again? She did not cry until he was out the door.

“It’s sort of like a test,” Bill Brussel said.

The man was thick in limbs and chest. His head was faultlessly shaven, to reconcile hereditary balding, so the office gossip went. It was slightly geometric, like a papier-mâchéd butternut dropped too many times. His eyebrows were thin and sadly arched. He had a spilling gut and spilling chins, but he fitted perfectly into a sharp-edged suit, with a perfectly knotted, striped tie.

His desk and office were orderly, the shelf packed to capacity with solid maroon books, with the spines aligned so that they appeared as flat as a secret-cabinet door. And next to his computer monitor sat the various components of a flourishing formicarium, with ants trundling through the tunnels that linked three perspex, sand-filled farmhouses.

Manager Bill Brussel, amateur myrmecologist, dined at the top-storey buffet.

The ants continued marching through the tubes. They seemed to sniff one another as they avoided collision.

“A test?” Buddy Kelly said, tinkering with his hands and struggling to maintain a rigid back – as he had resolved to do before he sat down.

Brussel had the habit of lolling into sentences with a sound from deep inside his throat, a rumbling '*Mmm*', which hooked onto the pioneering word in each phrase. He let his larynx idle, as if to accumulate sufficient momentum to overcome his personal indifference to what the sounds symbolised. This ritual in no way negated the tedium of his words' delivery.

“Mmmister --” (He seemed to have forgotten Buddy's surname, or else he didn't care to say it), “let me explain it to so you can understand. Can you tell me, what floor are we on?”

Brussel's torso tottered forward and his eyes glittered for an instant. He was like a portly faun, with his stumpy legs dangling from the chair, his small feet hanging off the ground.

“Forty three?” said Buddy Kelly, slightly nervous. Everyone in the office knew of Brussel, of his whimsical moods, his impersonal manner.

“Forty three. Do you think I want to be sitting in this office on forty three? Yes,” he said, denying the young man a chance to break his flow. “Yes Mister -- I do. Because up

there,” he threw a thumb to the ceiling, “up there there’s power up for grabs, real power, do you know what I mean when I say that?”

“I thi--”

“No,” he said. He seemed excited now, embroiled in the monopolistic exchange.

“No, you don’t,” he said, looking through Buddy. “It’s quite simple. Look at my ants; they have a queen. Advanced animals, worshipping a woman. But they work for a woman, not to get a woman, do you see what I mean? And there are no other woman ants. Do you see what I mean?”

“Not really,” Buddy Kelly said.

“Actually women have nothing to do with what I am trying to say, you see, because the queen is born the queen. With humans it’s different. Everyone can, they believe, become the queen. And what’s far worse, Mister -- is that everyone thinks they have a right to become the queen. What’s far worse is everybody thinks they *deserve* to become the queen. But we’re not like ants at all. Ants actually have nothing to do with it at all. Ants have rules they follow, rules they cannot break. They’re programmed. Let me ask you this: aren’t you happy here?”

“I am, Mr Brussel,” Buddy Kelly said.

“Please. Bill.”

“I am, Bill.” Brussel seemed to wince as Buddy uttered his name. But Buddy Kelly reminded himself that he had been a good employee and said with correlating confidence, “I just think I’ve earned a shot at advancement. You’ve seen my records.”

“I have,” Brussel said unimpressed, “and now you can see that you are the perfect illustration of what I mean.”

Buddy Kelly hadn’t told him the real reason why he wanted this assignment. Perhaps he was partially right, sagely Bill Brussel with his dented, half-wit mask. Buddy did want more; more pay, more privilege, and power if you were the kind to equate the two. But the real reason he was here was folded and unsigned in an envelope in his jacket pocket.

At the Mosca, Chester had informed him that Azania was rising in priority, and Buddy had looked at him sincerely and told him that he wanted to go, as soon as possible. He never imagined it would be *this* soon.

Did Brussel know his reasons? Buddy Kelly thought, at that moment, that perhaps the truth would have settled better with Bill, that perhaps it was a mite of personal choice and honesty struggling through the bureaucratic sift which excited him.

Buddy Kelly floundered to find an absolving response. “I don’t want to be the queen Bill,” he said. “I just want slightly more. I want to give more to the UP, to this state.”

Bill fired him a prickly look. “No. You misunderstand me. I am here because I choose to be. And I choose to be because I manage this floor and it’s a good position, and I further the aims of this party, yes, but the higher up there you go, the bigger your desk, the more of an asshole you become.” The hint of menial humour fled from his lips. “The more you jeopardise ... that is ... endanger your records, because the queen ... the queen sits on top of the pile and the pile is made up of ants. Because the higher you go the more of your fellows you push down and step on. That is all what I mean.”

Buddy Kelly searched his eyes for kindness – for admittance of Buddy's individuality.

“Bill, I think there’s plenty of space for everyone at the top. You just build the pile out of something else, in this day and age, make robots to build it for you. Isn't that what the UP is all about?”

Bill smiled his manager’s smile. He breathed deeply, half a sigh.

“That’s fine, you can think for yourself, unlike some of them,” he covered his mouth with the back of a hand and thumbed at the office hall. “As I was saying, it’s like a test. Some people don’t have the stomach for travel, new ideas, and it’s a good indication of your suitability for, more responsibility, let’s say. I don't mean to hold you back Mister -- you must understand that. I will remain a friend.”

Buddy Kelly nodded demurely. The deal was concluded. And how easy it had been. Whatever you say Bill, he thought.

“I’ve heard good things about you, felt some pressure to be frank. So enough chatter. Let me tell you this.”

He leaned across the table clumsily, handed Buddy Kelly a small velvet slip which contained a circular badge depicting a golden man on one knee with a bow extended, its arrow pointing at the rays of a sun – the party logo. The figure was bevelled above a circle of black, and a thin gold band ran around its circumference.

“Wear this at all times. This is important. That is all. It should take two days. Read the report. It’s easy as hell. You leave tonight, and if you’re lucky, I won’t be seeing you again. Not in my office in any case, maybe for some lobster, if you see what I mean.”

“Thank you, Bill,” Buddy said and stood up, feeling an urge to shove out his hand to this sloppy man with his indecipherable temperament, but decided against it.

“Thank you Mr --” Brussel said while looking at his monitor obliviously, and his gaze lingered there until Buddy was back in the hall.

Part III

Heir to Flames

“Buddy.”

A voice. A reluctant femininity.

“Buddy.”

A walloping storm; a monsoon.

A hand was pushing his shoulder, he opened his eyes and was born again, shaken from the depths of controlled coma. A clean soul packaged in a new vessel.

Christ, he thought, where the hell am I?

It's amazing how one takes waking up for granted, how one scratches behind the ear and ignores where the mind has been cavorting. And he thought, wait, that's the same voice in my head that will never stop talking, the same words I've heard before, it's the same voice that whistles pop songs if it must, that never stops, until it does, and then you wake up again.

But this sleep felt like death. There was no light, no data, no I. And that helmeted figure sounded like a woman in denial, bruising him out of nothingness with dowel-stick fingers.

“We're *here*,” she had to shout.

The hard rain of metempsychosis turned out to be rotor blades beating noise out of the air. His fresh vessel was the same old one, increasingly deteriorated, and that clingy weight was still there around his eyes. He could have been in a different time zone, a different time. Born again, unbelieving and groggy.

“Where the ...” he murmured, scraping caked spittle off his cheek, “where are we?”

“We're where you need to be,” the helmeted woman said. “Look, I can't get any closer. You see that path? Just follow it.”

He looked out through the helicopter's dragonfly eyes and saw the landing zone, a reddish patch of compacted dirt surrounded by acned rock and tangled bush. He saw the path she had pointed out, trailing away into the viscous dark beyond.

He jumped out of the vehicle and into a crouch – that incontestable anti-decapitation crouch – his bag bumping by his shoulders. He looked back to the pilot unsure, but she leaned over to pull closed the door. He grabbed it as it swang, afraid.

“You'll be back in two days?” Buddy Kelly asked.

“Just talk to Kops when you're done,” she said. “He'll call me.”

“Kops?”

“Uncle Kops on security.”

He turned to the path; a rusty carpet fading into oblivion.

“How far is it?” Buddy asked.

“Um, about 8 k's. Thirty minutes? That is, if nothing tries to eat you,” she beamed overlapping teeth.

He stood in the cold and held the eyes of this cameo performer in his life. She was suddenly wise and powerful and he was minutely encouraged by the humour in her taunt.

“Fine,” he said, “okay. Thanks.”

“Good. Oh, and buddy? You might want to consider wearing a bib when you sleep,” she said and gave a whinny-laugh (did she know his name?).

He made a dismissive wave and ran from the blades charging excitedly to a scream, butchering gravity out of night. Her dragonfly lifted off and he stood and watched it diminish like flare, its thundering heart engulfed by the black, and his eyes slowly adjusted until he could see a dark streak of ground below his feet.

That afternoon, as they had alighted in front of a pink sky, the city stacked and endless across the twilight, she had asked if he had ever flown before. He admitted that he hadn't and a brown tablet – another pill – had been placed into his hand. She had said it was to ensure he wouldn't get sick, that otherwise he most certainly would. A brown pill of transfiguration.

Now, Buddy Kelly had no option but to follow the the path. All around the unsoundable dark wiped clean the world of physical things. He walked without urgency, his fancy work shoes ticking off the small cubic stones scattered on the ground. The darkness was as thick as the heavy clouds above, which swallowed momentum from the breeze, engorging all but a chill to infest the bones.

And he felt something new and unnerving claw his insides. He felt that he was, in this place of true night, for the first time in his life, out of earshot. He felt alone enough to scream. His most intimate animal distress shrieked out, but here no head would turn.

Buddy Kelly placed one foot to settle where he knew the ground must be, and when it was steady, he placed the next. He suddenly missed the massed-grave city, the comfort of its lobotomised eyes.

Buddy Kelly was finally on the road to Azania.

He was in his navy suit, the party broach affixed to the lapel. He wore the grey Cabbie cap that had once belonged to his father, and his shoes made to shine on plush carpet and

tiles that never repeated. He carried the leather satchel, which contained, amongst some clothes, the portfolio folder Bill had earlier given him, which he had yet to open.

He thought of the city and its routine, the busy mouths packed in there, and the alienness he now experienced without that cushioning turbulence that was like continental collision.

Still, we're all born innocent and Buddy Kelly felt born again, because here in the dark, there was no one to know him, and wandering alone he thought he had forgotten the meaning of despondence and regret. Of guilt. He trod through the darkness with a head full of amenities, shuffling through the unfinished shape of purgatory.

He followed the gravel path and heard cricket chirps, deaf-calls for lost love ones, shrill detonations among the choking dark. They reminded him of his fridge's nocturnal chemistry.

The cold air carried a rich smell of rain recently fallen. It carried too the sour scent of turgid stalks and pollen, and he breathed it in deeply and it was what people were supposed to breathe.

Small bits of gravel rolled out underfoot, flung out behind him, and made a soothing sound as they came to rest, like seeds in a shaker. A foot slipped out from under him every so often, but his body was surprisingly quick to rebalance.

He glanced about pointlessly, chasing quick, floating bits around his corneas, and felt a nervous flutter in his bowels. There could have been someone out there, anything, ears upturned in the cold, salivating to the soft percussion of his progress.

By and by a hatch opened in the hefty spread of clouds and the waiting light from unreachable stars sprayed murky form across the terrain. He saw that the path he was on cut a wavy contour line low along a mountainside. On his left was a sheer face of crystalline rock, rising jagged for a few metres and after that, he couldn't see; on his right was waist-high vegetation, dense and wiry, which followed the steep slope to the low-lying void beyond, an algal swamp of shadow.

Sharp pieces of the rockface had fallen to the flat and he picked up a chunk. It wasn't heavy, had a ruddy colour, and when he threw it down it split and shattered on the path, its debris ringed in grainy shockwaves.

Buddy Kelly walked on and gradually the road curved around the wide base of a towering peak. This vertiginous butte had a silhouette like an infantryman in helmet, peering over him. The trail began to widen and become harder and the tinge of red the heavens had revealed turned slowly to faultless, manmade grey; a texture Buddy knew well, the stones diffusing away.

He waded on, warmed by the underfoot consistency and its promise of industrious man, of his comfortable things. The overhead sheath was breaking apart further, splashing dim light to blanket this world somehow outside the grid of flowing current. Buddy then heard a soft static. It became louder with each step. But there was no symbol of purpose in the surrounds he could see.

He passed some ruined stone steps, which coiled under the ravenous brush towards the peak's summit, like a stairway for bygone administrators of sacrifice.

The hissing grew as the path completed its circumvention of the soldier's peak. And the clouds spread wide, and birthed from this feathered frame their parting routes had made a crowd of immaculate stars, pinpoints of clean light, bright and gradually dimming away in steps. It seemed as if the whole of space were a fog of them, a scatter graph of history told in four dimensions. And where else would it be? The truth of time? But mapped in their density and vague arrangement?

He looked up at these constellations and saw the vertices which connected figures from infinite fables of creation. He witnessed a radiance that had long been banished from the Dalphiney sky. The starlight carved colossal plummets and stretches of jumbling land from the seabed of night, and as a tiny thought dwarfed in the spectral scene, he imagined renegade clouds to be all types of whales and sea-monsters, driving between the gaps in the high black crests.

He wondered whose world this was, where serenity was given space to dwell.

The concrete path continued on and widened to become a tarred road with a faded white line down its middle, marking two lanes. This road continued and hugged the curve of a massive escarpment that rose up formidably like a great wall on his left, an amphitheatre of hulking rock, slowly concave, its top flat, like a section of stepped barrier between highways except bowed and tremendous. This mountain stretched for thousands of metres in front of him, half-circling the sunken land below. It reached up to scrape the dispersing clouds. The crag was stark and straight against the sky, soaring high above the road.

Far in the distance, directly ahead of where he stood, the mountain's outline dipped and rose again in a bulbous hump, making in a bluff the shape of a sitting lion. The curve down this creature's rump tapered down until eventually plunging into the ocean. And the sea mirrored the shape of the mountain's curve and formed a bay, cut with piers and wharfs like strewn tinder. And cranes on the quay looked like giraffes standing in a shallow pond. Their frames were made of rigid triangles and Buddy counted seven of them standing upright, with the necks of the other six lowered, as if drinking, the

cantilever humps on their backs giving them the appearance of long-necked dinosaurs. And there were a few grey ships berthed at the docks.

Buddy Kelly was perched on the rim of that natural crater, halfway up the slope, before the exponential rise of the crag. To his right was a vast break of tightly woven foliage, amidst which countless massive boulders lay, like a field of rocks from an exploded moon. As the earth levelled out to the circular depression in the centre, which connected with the sea, Buddy discerned a mess of angular shale ever more dense. This was made up of crumbling homes, tall buildings (some of which were missing walls), roads, and here and there was a glint like lost cutlery. But the city was still and without life.

The effervescent roar became louder as he marched on, and he came upon a waterfall which fell in a beam from a ledge way up on the cliff wall, splashing neon fireworks in a pool beside the road. A stream cut a furrow across the asphalt, sheets of gold-speckled water spilling around it. He crossed over it in a running jump. Ahead the road snaked in long curves alongside the heavy curtain folds of the rising mountain.

He walked on and passed huge mounds of the fallen sandstone, shattered and stacked like powder, some of the piles reaching across the central divide of the road. Short wooden poles lined the right side of the old highway. These were once threaded together by a thick arresting cable, which now hung slack and incomplete, marked with hints of flaking white paint.

And there was a curious aqua glow hanging far in the distance. It seemed to originate from near the top of the flat mountain, about two-thirds along its length. This florescent blue rebounded off folds in the berg's mottled face, and one of these folds blocked the light's source from view.

For a short while he continued, waiting to glimpse a lighthouse lamp or some other device responsible for this sheen which coated the clouds blue. After two more bends of the contour road it appeared, so ghastly and achingly bright that he had to lift his arm to shield his retreating pupils.

Just then the soft grey world he had discovered melted away, and he stood, faintly aware of his galloping heart, staring at the brilliant shape, the lucent blue of flame. The shape was contained within a square, mutating slowly in the night, dissolving the border between mountain and sky.*

It appeared at first to be the skull of a beast. Its bright aurora blue shaped a squat head with large hollow eyes, with two blotchy horns, two nostrils, somehow its aspect nefarious and alive. As Buddy Kelly stood stunned, the ghastly mask slowly morphed, remaining

* See pg 2

symmetrical about its middle. The eyes connected at the centre, and two more seemed to pop out above them. Their nostrils joined and widened and broke into the small teeth of another grimacing skull. This one was flat, like that of an alligator, but cleaved in two.

Then, the frontal mass of plasmatic blue was shredded into another distorted face, which had the rough form of an inverted pelvis with four, no, six eyes bored into its plates, and the cavity was an angry, howling mouth.

To Buddy Kelly's animal intuition, the form this hovering inkblot assumed was unambiguous: it was a warning of poison and fangs and fibrous bones – it was the mimesis of a nightmarish butterfly. He perceived neither more nor less than a symbol of threat, lunging out angrily to engulf sense and decency, commanding the dark.

And he watched the wraith transform; became a snake, a demonic insect, a terrible wasp loaded with sharp, curved feelers and claws and stings. And these sharp spines dismembered into dots, dribbled here and there along its scraggly edge, with small oval eyes shaped in the azure, a skull, more human now, ugly teeth, deranged and strangely sad with large nostril tears of burning blue.

He gazed unbelievably at the seamless transmogrification, this horrific spectre, which against all his will, Buddy Kelly knew was no illusion. For it shone from the top of a building, whose nature was betrayed by the straightness of its edges, a building that was choked into a gorge as if a thick wedge had been sliced from the block of the mountain. This inkblot was Azania's face, this primordial thing from nightmares, but he knew it to be no dream.

What purpose could such a sign hold but for the pricking of that singular reflex? The summoning of fear? And it had succeeded because Buddy Kelly had been terrified. He closed his eyes and it was still there, shifting on the back of his eyelids; an orange afterimage of death reclaiming the earth, through all the configurations of human dread.

Buddy Kelly suddenly thought of the billboards in Dalphiney, sandwich-boarded over the buildings, parading flawless smiles and perfect skin, glowing loudly at the intersection of streets, day and night.

He quickened his step but this harrowing thing guarding the road to Azania was impossible to ignore, and he journeyed on to where the road appeared to end, fathoms below the scowling chimera.

He was bewildered. He was alone, but this did not feel exceedingly strange. Danger never felt too real. This was part of his conditioning, this was civilisation's highest achievement.

He followed the undulating curves of the broken highway and, after a way, he froze again. He had heard moans, sobbing, determined and weary.

He scrunched his eyes and tried to extract sense from the warring rays, but what he saw now was real too. He saw the outline of figures, eight or ten loping ghosts, tailing the snivelling down the darkening road. He looked away, willing hallucination, waiting for them to disappear, but their forms gathered texture and they were real too.

These people followed the road, coming towards him. He moved to the side to press against the cliff. They came upon him and he felt impelled to hide away, but there was no escape from the track's winding course. They shuffled in a group as if joined by a single slug leg. There was a woman and the rest were men.

The woman looked at Buddy Kelly as if he were a grotesque chiselled from the rock, her eyes sparkling wet. He could not smile nor look away, struck dumb like a witness to genocide. The men looked at him and then at the ground as if they were returning deserters, shamed with the news of defeat. Their shoulders were shrouded in throw blankets but they shivered nonetheless.

A tall, gaunt man at the back stood erect while the others stooped, his arm around the woman. As they passed by, Buddy Kelly recognised the distinctive roundness of her belly, a womb full to its purpose and draped in simple clothes. The man holding her had a stately bearing and keen bones, and as he passed Buddy Kelly (who huddled against the scarp), his eyes locked onto Buddy's broach. He now looked to Buddy with disdain. Some of them were crying but no one spoke and they drifted past without destination, the banished, their backs coated in the cold light, their sandals softly pattering off the blue-soaked road.

Buddy Kelly was afraid. His plump lips were stretched far across his face. His dense eyelashes were frittering as the sapphire threat loomed above him.

What had brought him here? Was it merely selfish curiosity? A quest for reaffirmation? It was laughable, but that could have been the reason he had come so far, the reason he had absconded from his all-providing habitat. He had wanted to know if Winch was aware that his family had fallen apart. Buddy Kelly had wanted him to be the lesson that a man can falter.

The road dove gently and rose again, strings of weed groped out of every fissure torn in its surface, and gaping holes like bitemarks bared its dermal stone.

Buddy Kelly followed the road to its end. He now stood below the building wedged in the gully. The warning marking was dimming and brightening the night with the spattering of its mood, now beaming out directly above him.

This was Azania, its walls slatted with thousands of bunkerlike windows. This building was a thousand metres above the road, maybe two above the sea, and, craving the sound of a human voice, Buddy Kelly was now filled with anger. He could have been warned.

23. Make Light Of These Things

A short gravel path broke from the tarred road and led to the bottom of a metal stairwell. These rickety stairs were wide enough for three people side by side, and they twisted up, stilted between boulders, to the tower's entrance.

The road Buddy Kelly had been on continued a way and gradually shrunk to nothing as it followed a ridge on the bluff, which spiked and fell in waves down across the vista in front of him, circumventing the broken city, eventually to the level of the sea. Above him, the eerie blue symbol of Azania was transforming, flat against the building's crown. The light extended and contracted his irises to the point of fatigue, as it unsettled the gradient of night.

He climbed the stairs, treading softly, to suppress the metallic groan they gave out under his weight, and he stopped near the top, hearing voices borne on the hesitant breeze. He raised his head to peep over and across a brief earthen plateau.

He saw that the rectangular building was rooted into a broad ledge. He saw rows and rows of cross-shaped apertures puncturing the monotonous façade, which was suffused with the blue-grey of cold organs. He saw how the tower was fitted snugly into that deepest chasm in the mountain's face, stacked into the rock, seeming to bow perspective in its stretch to the mountain's summit.

At its base were four double-door frames: unadorned square hollows blocked by turnstiles and their surrounding cages. Each turnstile had a revolvable pole at its middle, which was pronged with horizontal bars, like steel comb-teeth, jutting out every ninety degrees.

On ground level were two figures, one of whom, in a green hooded raincoat, was sitting and smoking, with his arms draped over his knees, resting against the concrete wall. The other was standing beside him, wearing a dark duffel jacket, the horn fastenings done up along its length, the neck strap buttoned up, with a spacious hood drawn over his head.

The standing man was tall and robust and his eyes were in darkness, but Buddy Kelly could see his round, ceremonious lips, his full beard covering a strong lower jaw. This man had, slung by his waist, a bayoneted automatic rifle, with the magazine's iconic trigger-curve hooking down and out from his long shadow across the ground.

These eyeless men, with their cowls and heavy boots, looked like renegade monks guarding some sacrosanct tome. Buddy Kelly stood and watched and listened with nowhere else to go but on, through the tower's jaws.

"You did well, Winston," the standing man was saying in a strong, paternal voice, his pronunciation strangely flat. "Your girl will love you well for it."

The sitting man chuckled boisterously, "Uncle," he said, "you should know by now, I don't have just one girl. Serious. Don't laugh. And they don't all love me. When you give me one of those *then* they all will love me."

The tall man turned and took the cigarette from Winston. He reached forward to grip the youth's shoulder, his weapon's lance in scabbard protruding from his form.

"Winston. It is true that it is not our part to have compassion," he said, "it is true that it is not our duty to reassure. When you are given this thing you are made a monster, because this is a thing made to bring death and it cannot do so unless wielded by a man, and so you will become a tool of death."

"I understand what it is, Uncle," the sitting man replied. His voice betrayed deference; his youth.

"When you return to the inside, to your family, when you take off these clothes, you must return to being a man. You must leave the monster behind. This is important. Out here, in these clothes, you can compel fear, and you must, but inside you have to become human again." He took a hungry drag from the cigarette. "But you did well, Winston."

"I know, Uncle. It was easy," Winston said, pulling back his hood, turning to look away from the talking man. He then took out a strip of plastic from a pocket and began combing his spongy hair up into his hand.

"It did not affect me, Uncle".

"You should not make light of these things, Nephew. I have seen people like you turn bad. I have seen those who claim to enjoy this work go bad and they, *themselves* thrown into the dark outskirts snivelling and with revenge contorting their mouths."

He sucked on the cigarette, the smoke drifting slowly out from his nostrils, offered it back.

Uncle Kops was worried about this boy. That he could use the company since Rogue Joe had deserted – naturally, with his rifle and boots – was no question, although that is not to say he had issue bearing the unenviable duties alone.

He did not mind handling the incomings and even the traumatic outgoings at the pedestrian door, and keeping awake, all on his own; this had never been a problem for Uncle Kops. But, at about the time when Aunty Trisha had twisted his arm to take

Winston under his wing, he had already started feeling the full disheartening weight of this role, the burden of the monster's mask, and he had caught himself more than once lost in unhealthy reverie. Rogue Joe hadn't liked particular aspects of the job either, but when the last sobs of the banished had faded away, he had been good to share a smoke with. He could bring up plenty of topics which took your mind somewhere else. And he had been composed and had seen all things clearly, so that, in the end, Kops did not blame him for leaving.

“No, Uncle, it was nothing,” Winston was saying. He stood up and moved close to Kops. “I felt something, Uncle. When I saw the terror in their eyes. A rush. I think I must already be a monster, hey? Now I have the proof.”

Uncle Kops laughed. “We'll see,” he said, not believing that the boy was wicked.

But Kops couldn't ignore the irony, and it was hard to believe that it had not been obvious to Aunty Trisha – but then, maybe that's why she had chosen him. She had seen more things, many more things than had Kops (even though Kops was no polyp). She knew things, she was a wise old lady. Maybe that's why she had chosen him: for the irony. He could only hope the old lady knew what she was doing – that these things sometimes worked out best when they were most backward.

Meanwhile, Buddy Kelly, crouched at the top of the stairs, was suffering from a server bout of situational discomfort. He couldn't turn back – there was nowhere to go – and so he stood up.

So, this was Azania, he thought, and there was a man he sought. The letter had told him that this man would be here, inside the tower. As he climbed the remaining stairs, he tried to harden his eyes, pressing forward with a determined resignation.

Ambling across the stretch of variegated grass before the doors, he tried to swing his arms casually, but on account of his nerves, he couldn't get them to match the rhythm of his step. Thus, the thin man appeared from the dark, strolling awkwardly, with rounded shoulders, looking not mean but with that expression one assumed when embroiled in a mental battle to suppress one's flatulence.

“Who's that?” Winston shouted upon seeing Buddy, sounding hostile and intimidating despite his youthful timbre. He made a grab for Kops' gun, but the older man had already gripped the burnished wooden buttstock and forend firmly, already pulled it back to his chest.

“Easy now, Nephew,” the taller man said.

Buddy Kelly did not say a word (forgive him if it might sound silly) as he did not want to raise his voice, as he feared for the purity of the sound that might escape. So he had

moved to within a few metres of the men, despite the obvious danger of silence, with his hands open-palmed by his shoulders. Buddy trusted he was here for a respectable reason, that they would be open to reason. But by this time, Winston was upon him and had brushed Buddy's satchel off his shoulder and onto the ground.

“Winston,” Uncle Kops said with controlled belligerence – in that self-possessed way of a man who knows himself, “come stand by me.”

The youth, who had his knees bent and hands ready to dust down Buddy Kelly's blaser, looked back and Kops shook his head slowly.

Kops said, “Come stand by me.”

Winston squared his shoulders and walked backwards, eyeing Buddy menacingly, until he was back next to the other.

Uncle Kops jabbed the air with his rifle's muzzle, indicating Buddy Kelly's lapel. “You're here on business. UP. We heard your bird,” Kops said.

Buddy Kelly bent over and picked up his satchel slowly.

“That's right. Here on business. I need to meet with ...” he opened the bag and the two guards watched as he rifled through its contents, muttering to himself, until eventually, very delicately, he drew out the red plastic folder. He briskly scanned its shaking pages, “On business. I need to meet with ... Aunt Nancy.”

As Winston glimpsed, in his mind's eye, the potential ramifications of his impertinence, his face was fixed bare with embarrassment and fear.

“I'm so sorry about the fuss,” Uncle Kops was saying. “Winston here is new on the scene,” and Buddy Kelly didn't know what to say, new on the scene himself.

The strong, older man pulled back his hood and his face was long, a handsome incarnation of the tranquil dignity in his tone, the brawny pride wrapped up in his decorous coat. His hair was of medium length, bushy but neat, and it sat atop the round-cornered rectangle of a high forehead.

“That's alright,” Buddy Kelly said, trying to sound affronted yet exonerating in an inadequate mimicry of Uncle Kops – for whom the two came both genuinely and spontaneously. “They all gotta learn, hey?” Buddy said.

“Indeed they do. And if you would pardon your objectification, I would point out to my young nephew, in the name of learning, the broach on your jacket, in hope he might remember its shape and understand its significance for future encounters as a symbol of friendship.”

Buddy Kelly looked down to the broach. He said: “Indeed, I come to your ... I come to this place as a friend.”

Uncle Kops seemed to carry, at the edges of his lips, a melancholic smile. And the pupils of his widely spaced eyes were almost imperceptibly diverging. “Come in,” he said, stepping back cordially. “It is late to be travelling. Aunty Trisha will find you a warm place to sleep.”

Winston stepped back too, and Buddy Kelly walked past them hunching forward, nodding his head politely at Kops, as was his way. He pushed the turnstile and, when it failed to move, he glanced at Kops again, smiled demurely, then pushed harder and eventually passed through the croaking barrier into the darkness of the ground floor.

Before following, Uncle Kops turned to Winston. Kops fuzzed the youth's hair roughly, whispered, “Until you show me you can be a man, I cannot make you anything else.”

And Kops worried that it might have been too incongruous. That it might have been irreconcilable. For his young partner had, at the moment his first cell enlivened in his mother's womb, become the reason his parents must have been ushered out of here, away from their home to find their deaths.

By this time, Buddy Kelly had walked a short way into the building's unlit interior and, not sure where to go, he glanced back. The tall man was behind him.

Kops said, “You've been here before?”

“No,” said Buddy. “No, I haven't”.

“You bring any smokes?”

“No, not this time.”

“Okay, follow the blue,” he said (as if this was a normal thing for one to say). “I'll see you on your way out. Go well.”

And with that, Kops stepped away to the right and was smothered by the darkness.

Although the clouds had mostly fled from overhead, and the stars' wayworn light might have leaked inside and shaped the surrounding space, the windows here at Azania's mouth were battened down. Here in the first two floors, in Azania' gullet, the windows were battened down.

Buddy Kelly heard a distant rumble coming from above him – a rumble that would never cease, but only amplify – and all he could see was the empty darkness. Gradually, his eyes adjusting, he came to make out four dull, blue-tinged squares of light in a row in front of him, which had black bars in four directions at the centre of each. In front of one of these blocks, a dim figure was holding a satchel in his left hand and wearing a grey Gatsby hat.

Buddy Kelly walked towards the light and, as he approached, his reflection grew. He looked at himself in the weak, spooky glow and saw over his shoulder, reflected from the

one-way glass, the silhouette of a hooded figure breaking the shape of one of the four squares. Buddy turned quickly to look behind him but the outline was straight once more, but for its feathered halo.

Buddy Kelly faced his reflection. He peered closely at himself. He raised a finger to jab at the dark rings below his dark, glistening eyes, and when he touched himself he shivered violently. He looked livid. Corpse-like. A lost spirit from the city.

He bent over to return the folder to his bag and noticed faint collars of red dust on the hems of his trousers. He began brushing his pants but suddenly jumped with fright as a thin blue line flashed brightly on the floor. It then grew faint and slowly bright again.

It was as thin as a pencil, this florescent tube slotted into the concrete floor. The line had a starting point where he stood, and also in front of the reflections of the other three doorways. These lines merged – like the connections of four grandparents in a family-tree – into one long stroke which led to his left, and there, cornered right at ninety degrees. The line was then severed abruptly, but jumped and continued again on the same horizontal plain, on the mirror-wall of the narrow tunnel it pursued.

As Buddy Kelly straightened, he was startled by the closeness of the image of himself. He watched through smoothly widening eyes as his aspect became old with fright, as his lips down-turned, as c-shaped creases formed around the corners of his sensual mouth. The spectacle was ugly. He looked so old. And this portrayal of his own fear, so gloomy, so close, frightened him further.

He turned left on the spot and walked wearily to where the stripe cornered. He tried not to look at himself, but he could not help notice the twinkling in his eyes, his own portrait creeping forward in his periphery with its bent. And behind him were two silhouettes of hooded figures, their faint movements, in two separate boxes of the milky-blue.

He rounded the corner and found himself in a narrow corridor. The blue light continued for a short way and then turned sharply left. He followed. On either side of him his reflection replicated (seemed to mock) his sneaking progress through the murk. The line was streaked again and again in all the mirrors surrounding him, with his faceless body creeping on either side, shrinking backwards into the shrinking rectangles in a railroad stretch of ghostly light, smaller and smaller, on either side of him, infinitely.

He followed the line of blue through another narrow passageway. It rounded the corner, left again, and there, staring straight at him, a good ten metres ahead, a dwarf salesman stood. He pulled off his hat in a panic and slung his bag around his shoulder and

continued on, fingering his hat. Buddy thought he heard beyond the rumble (or it could have been in his head) the after-silence of a maniacal laugh.

At the end of this stretch, he stopped. He bent over again. He felt the warm bulb on the floor with his fingertips. Where it turned right, he saw that another section of tube, unlit, branched off to the left and, what was that movement? He leaned in. Ants. A spaced trail of ants like from the tubes bridging Brussel's farms, the creatures journeying intently along the blue.

He stalked on. Around the next corner, the blue zigzagged again, left again. He walked. Followed the guideline. Turned right. Forward three metres, right again. Straight for six metres. Left. Seven metres. Right. Right again.

Buddy Kelly paused to confront himself once more. By now the blue line was the only affective luminescence in the mirror-lined avenues, and it dissected his face into those haunting shapes which some children, those who had been audience to the recital of ghost-stories by torch-lit faces, those who had witnessed the devilish smiles and mean brows occasioned by the sunken light, remembered only too well. He looked up. Points in his eyes fluttered back at him like bulbs far away, under the effect of atmospheric disturbance.

And Buddy Kelly had not – perhaps it can be admitted – undergone those extremities of experience which existence had dealt to some, to those who had since awakened daily to a nightmare weakly disguised as day. He had not been immersed in situations of deadly conundrum, as had certain individuals of the Dalphiney underworld, as had their victims. Those individuals who lurked around the gutters of this place, too. Those who had had the spark in their souls snuffed out, because of the things they had seen, because of the things they had seen done to each other. The things they had done.

Nor, for the duration of his childhood, had he been unrealistically shielded from injected snapshots into the suffering of other men. Indeed, Buddy Kelly had, on occasion, seen the true harshness visible there in Dalphiney; the wretched were nigh on impossible to ignore. But as Buddy Kelly regarded himself now, he saw an organism fast reaching its prime (or perhaps it had already past it).

He saw the animal's eyes like peeled litchis, he saw the black bruises underneath, the horrendous downward arch where his two sanguine lips met, the terrible deprecation of a boyish face in a different light. And he was afraid, confronted by no more than this naked representation of himself. By the success of time. And he wondered how low the frown could stretch. He wondered how long was left before the life would flitter away. And he

brought a hand to his cheek and touched himself lightly and wondered if there was yet time in the future for someone who loved him to do the same.

He hurried on, hearing his blunt footsteps, and around each corner – he did not know by this point, which way he might be facing – he saw at floor level the scores of dashed blue streaks the colour of flame; one was real, the others only skewed reproductions. And there to greet him, within reach or a long span away, a hovering set of liquid eyes under a black brow, a frown, the pallid underside of a nose swamped in the blackness, a dim, grey 'v' (which was his shirt and tie under the pieces of face), the glint of the broach.

He followed the maze and after he had turned once more and seen once more, far in the distance, the floating white eyes, he looked down to the blue line and noticed that it bent in the middle of the floor, but not at a right angle. Rather, it reached the centre of an eight pronged star, the other outstretching fronds unlit, and led away, at an acute angle, to the illusionary walls of another corridor.

Buddy Kelly quickened his pace. He replaced his hat. He was not quite running, but was a single fright away from breaking into a jog. He felt the slick of sweat on his hands and he followed the blue as Uncle Kops had instructed.

Through all the u-turns and chicanes and doglegs the maze assumed, the disorientating ruses of that long labyrinth, he followed that line, all the while witness to the mounting frustration in those myriad phantasmal eyes. And he came to a section where the light-blue crossed over another perpendicular line, which was also glowing, but in a darker shade of blue. And he reeled, struck by the sharp stench of something rotting.

He continued on and after many minutes of twists and corners, the line bent left in a slow angle. When he stepped forward, trying to follow its route, his foot made contact with the ground too early. The unexpected impact twisted his ankle. For it was not a flat deviation but in fact a ramp. He followed it up steeply and hurried through this morass, limping for a time. He turned left, right, left, left again.

Eventually, after untrackable twists and turns, the path travelled down another ramp and he followed the line as it ran straight, crossing over another perpendicular glowing line of a lighter blue. And he caught again the offensive scent of death unattended to.

Buddy Kelly was disoriented, but he had marked the changes in elevation and, by and by, dejected and stumbling through the tunnels of the second floor, he came to the softly glowing mouth of a wide up-ramp. He ambled up its steep grade, and as he neared the top the blackness gradually enfolded into colour (as do the surrounds when one ascends from a deep ocean bed), and Buddy Kelly, suddenly exhausted with relief, saw the blue light

terminating with the ramp, at the spread of the third floor and the grey tatters of a sifted dawn.

The only real shortcoming of the desk was its tremendous weight.

The surfaces still held that strong scent – 'woody' she thought described it best (would you believe?) – which was remarkable because the majestic piece of furniture was certainly a lot older than Auntie Trisha. Yet, it still had, trapped within its dusky components, that charmingly rustic red-cedar smell, which so conveniently kept away the moths from her papers.

She did not need to lean forward to find the scent – it was deeply infused into her skin, into her clothes – yet, she did now anyway. She leaned forward, her wrinkly arms hugging the surface of the desk, and snuffled greedily. Her nostrils twitched. The smell made her feel delightfully secure.

But it was not the smell alone that augmented this sensation. It was the eight little ivory-knobbed drawers, which were four to a side around the central cabinet. It was the eight paper-stuffed pigeon-holes in a row above the drawers. And, more than anything, it was the knowledge that, dispersed cryptically amongst its holds, were her timetables and checklists and diagrams, these palpable white records of every action of her long career; her calculator and staplers and teabags and stickers, too. These things had come to be the chemicals symphonised into this wonderful, sylvan odour she now imbibed, which made her feel blissfully secure.

But the sturdy *Beureau à gradin* was rather heavy, which came as no surprise to her, having, as she did, an intimate understanding of the dimensions of its knotless materials, along with an understanding of the contents of its 23 compartments.

Aside from the aforementioned segments, the burnt-red article had three shelves by her left leg and another three by her right, and there was the wide, flat drawer she pushed her belly against (where she kept all her rulers and pens – even the used-up ones). And it had the second-tiered shelf above the small pigeon-holes, upon which now sat, in a plain glass vase between stacks of blank pads, the lolling orange heads of a bunch of unopened proteas.

That the flowers wouldn't ever open was regrettable, she mused while strumming the feathery orbs with her fingertips, but this did not detract from their appeal. They were pretty nonetheless, no doubt peculiar, like the fat, drunken eyes of many a blind Cyclops.

On either side of the work-surface (and of the drawers on its top) were bevelled sections of the rich red-cedar, which tied the piece together with their elegant curves, which must have weighed a good few kilograms in and of themselves. And she did not mind that this, her work-station, was mildly scratched and stained (from where she had left her tea standing). She did not mind that some of the drawer-knobs were missing, for the stoic old thing had been through a lot.

What bothered Aunty Trisha was that she could not move, not even with the help of the strong labourers now resting after the morning shift, that she imagined she could not, or perhaps more importantly, that she *did not want* attempt move it. It had always sat where it was now, close to the fireplace (but not unbearably so), and she had always felt secure sitting behind it. It was only because a pipe in the ceiling had sprung a leak with the coming of the rains that she had even considered the idea. And this annoying leak happened to be dripping right in the middle of where she was supposed to be working.

Aunty Trisha watched the drops as one would a mosquito, sluggish with anaemic, preparing to land. She watched them plop and waited. Watched, like a cat, hesitated. Then she quickly switched, between drips, the full mug with the empty butterfly one which had been waiting on standby.

Feeling satisfied with her effort, she set about trying to ignore the noise of the drip as it struck the mug's ceramic bottom – as well as the faint spray from each collision, which make her blink and shiver when the cold water took her by surprise and splashed her nose.

Aunty Trisha wiped her nose. She gently patted her beautiful green head-scarf, checking the pleat above her forehead. The scarf's tails hung by her old breasts, and were made of the same material as her long top, a few shades lighter than the thick, ruffled skirt covering her stockinged legs.

She sidled up to the shelves on the left side of the desk and continued filling markings into one of the morning's checklists. Next to the appropriate stickers, she expertly drew in the refined designs. A narrow triangle pointing upwards with a curly tail, which mildly resembled a tree or a futuristic apple, symbolised rice (35 of them today). Three wavy lines like water represented logs (52 of them); suns for sugar (nine); leaves for beans (21), and so on. The quaint scrawls of her own invented language.

These indecipherable hieroglyphics, which swapped significance with the season, had taken many years of fastidious effort to perfect. Their interplay was largely responsible for the daily accomplishment of a rather remarkable feat: that her fellow indigens were kept

warm and fed and hence, day in, day out, remained manageable. She grinned at the thought of it: 34 years without a major hitch.

Aunty Trisha liked to imagine she had too much dignity to be conniving. She liked to imagine that the fabrication of her unique system, while perhaps a little lavish, was merely incidental to her obligations; merely the excusable whims of a creative mind set to task. But then, she had come to accept that she might just be ingeniously wily, that while she would not presume to value herself above others, above the rules others must follow, while she would not ever beg, even to spare her own life, it was no coincidence that she was the oldest certified person in Azania – aside, of course, from Aunt Nancy himself.

And it was not on strength of character alone that she had become the single most indispensable woman in the community, but also owing to a long history of meticulous planning. For the product of age and wit is wisdom, thought she, but Aunty Trisha had always been clever, and no one would dare call her conniving or, for that matter, selfish – perhaps if they must call her something, it would be proud. Proud, she thought, amused by her own critical self-detachment, proud of her language and her system, her foresight, because it all worked and was intractably scrambled, and thus, made her invaluable.

Soon the mug was nearly full. She blinked and shivered as her nose was sprinkled with droplets. And just as she was about to stand up, having slotted the first page of the daily inventory at the bottom of the pile in the second drawer on her left, and the second page on the top of pile in the third shelf on her right, she saw over her desk, beyond the orderly stockpile, a young man emerge from the pedestrian ramp. Aunty Trisha evaluated him – he looked lost – and decided it might be a good idea to remain where she was for a moment longer.

She waved at him but he did not seem to notice from across the way. He was quite scrawny but looked rather stylish in his dark suit and round, mouse-grey hat – (could this be him at last?). She waved her arms again and was caught off guard by the drip (honestly Trisha, when will you learn?). He was facing her direction but he did not see her.

He was standing still, his dark eyes captivated by the large square shaft in the middle of the floor, the four columns at its corners. He stared at the thick cables through its centre, engaged in their perennial slithering; like four trains slowly passing four others at a station.

“Woo-Ooo!” she called, but he was looking now at the bed where the handlers were sleeping near the fire behind her. “Over here,” she hollered.

But it was no use, and she lowered her arms and screwed-up her face in a self-conscious gesture of defeat. For, to make things worse, Flapjack was just emerging from

the cargo ramp over by the south-west corner of the floor, and the sight of him on his ridiculous red buggy still amazed her – and with the noise that contraption made. She had been out-trumped.

And sure enough the newcomer had seen Flapjack, and stood mystified as he crawled across the floor in the first run of his circuit, ignoring all onlookers as usual.

Buddy Kelly was tired, too tired to be surprised by much. He perused the shapes of this surreal environment with a kind of incredulous acceptance – as if in a dream.

What drew his attention most emphatically, as Aunty Trisha had predicted, was the spectacle of Flapjack, who was just down after weeks spent cleaning the tower's midsection.

The man was huge. He looked incapable of standing up, of walking. This notion was endorsed by the way in which the bags and pouches and lard-filled sacks, which were tacked to his skeleton, seemed to mould to the machine's seat and into crevasses between the red panels, seemingly smothering his legs and the steering wheel and the pedals and operating screen like a mound of insufficiently floured dough on a jungle-gym car.

To Buddy Kelly, Flapjack looked a part of the machine, like an ancient glass Buddha melted over its exterior. His fat, unshorn face was perched on top like a pimple. But, although Buddy Kelly felt mild disgust (and more sympathy for the man), Flapjack himself would have been quite pleased that, on first glance, he and the machine had been classed as one and the same.

For Flapjack couldn't, admittedly, do much. What he could do, aside from the obvious which was to eat, he did exceptionally well. This included cleaning the floors. He was also good at engaging his engineer's mind into understanding the stubborn nature of physics, as well as the practical problems involved in its regimentation and their technical constraints.

He could tell you, for example, all about the *Factory Cat 38*, his veritable mobile home, which looked much like a fork-lift but without the fork (and with some minor modifications). He could explain in minute detail how the two powerful circular side-brooms, which were like upside-down patty-pans on either side of the front caster wheel, swept debris from out of corners, out from around the pillars – with the help of the adjustable side wipers and rollers – and under the machine, into the path of the main tubular broom. This broom brushed them up, from beads to chunks of wood, into a large hopper (where was gathered the larger miscellany the collectors so loved – as well as a few snacks). From here, the dust and kernels and other fine particles were vacuumed up into the spacious and elastic polypropylene baghouse.

He could explain how the vacuum muffler reduced the noise-levels from the motors to just under 70 decibels (more than acceptable – he would know). He could elucidate on how the over-sized componentry and stainless-steel fastenings and 15 inch back tyres had allowed for him, at one time, to scour the floors at a respectable 6.5 kph – granted that was a long time ago. In any case, he could tell you why his increasing weight had decreased that rate. He could also tell you about the convenience of having the filter-bag below the seat, but probably wouldn't. He could describe all this, the relevant processes, not only because he still had the manual, but because Flapjack cared about these inhuman marvels substantially more than just about anything else.

So when Buddy Kelly nonchalantly scanned the building's third storey and noticed its almost incomplete quality, thinking to himself that it could have been an unfinished construction site, in this regard he was wrong.

To Flapjack, who could imagine the forces, the tension and compression and torsion at play – who could almost see red waves emitting from the structure's joints and beams – the building was not only complete, but a masterpiece.

Flapjack could, unlike Buddy Kelly, appreciate the square floor, roughly 70 metres in length and breadth, as a quilt of lightweight concrete slabs, each 10 centimetres thick and punctured with the various ramps. Flapjack was humbled by the brilliance of the fluted steel decks upon which the slabs rested, which were grids of thick girder beams and smaller bridged-trusses, which also comprised the ceiling of every floor.

But holding up a single floor was really the easy part. Flapjack, like Buddy Kelly, also knew of the prodigious height and, hence, the weight of Azania (not that he had seen it from the outside, but because he had seen enough of it, including the rigidity of its bones).

There were the thick steel columns, spaced a few metres apart and boxed in concrete (except for the middlemost four which acted as a track for the elevator), which extended from the top floor all the way into the bedrock. These were most concentrated around the central open shaft, marking three ever-expanding squares that together constituted the building's structural core. The strength of this arrangement, which supported most of the building's mass, meant that the floors could be relatively open, with a series of thinner columns, which had their lattice frames visible, forming another dashed square a short way from the curtain walls.

Now, the rigid outer walls were pure genius. They were in fact not walls *per se*, but made up of 40 steel columns, a metre between them. The columns were connected to one another in sets of four by spadrel plates welded horizontally across each set, forming ladder-like trusses, with the plates' embellished design creating cross-shaped openings to

the outside. These load-bearing trusses were joined to one another – Flapjack knew, having spent a lot of time approaching them – at staggered heights, like a strong brick wall laid on its side, hence, negating the heavy loads of Azania's violent winds and keeping the ground suitably stable.

Stepping forward and out of the path of the loud, gizmo-laden vehicle, Buddy Kelly could not have imagined that this neckless ooze of a man, with his near-catatonic forward stare and his boxy red body, rolling on his wheels and brooms, knew much about anything at all.

Soon, Flapjack was bumping up against the southern curtain wall, wondering cheerfully, to the single note of his machine's grizzly purr, how much more he could possibly consume (and what the weight might taste like) before his beautiful *Factory Cat* stopped moving altogether. The sleeping men, exhausted from their morning moil, didn't seem much phased by the cleaner and his roaring vessel.

It was then, through a breach in the high piles of chopped logs (tied in bundles of ten), between the sacks of coal and the cement bags turgid with various produce arranged between the old desk and the thick forest of pillars by the hole in the floor, that Buddy Kelly saw the green-topped head of the old lady. He saw her old lips mouthing some words, her bangled hands waving unenthusiastically.

As he approached her – Flapjack now turned around and began dragging along back towards the north wall – she quickly swapped the mugs.

She set her face in a condescending smile – for if it was indeed him, he was terribly late, a good few years, and perhaps she was faintly threatened by his importance, too. Despite his status as visitor and heir (if it was really him) he ought to know that she was well-deserving of his respect. And it certainly hadn't helped his case the way he had, just then, strolled apathetically over and slumped forward (with crossed arms) on the top shelf of her *Beureau*. He hadn't even bothered to look at it properly.

“You've come at last,” she said, pulling out a random roll of paper from the fifth pigeonhole and unfurling it atop the desk. It was the sheet she had once practised her symbols on, which now appeared silly, as if no more than a scribble-pad of children's doodles.

“I suppose I have,” said Buddy Kelly, glaring into her eyes, in a strong, almost challenging way.

This boy looked young, young and tired, but somehow hardened and, in his casual disaffection, mature. It must have been the suit, or the shadows across the hollows of his

drawn face, or maybe the forlorn shine to his eyes. It must be him. There was something regal to his look.

“Well, I’m glad,” she snapped. He raised his eyebrows as if in warning, and she quickly resumed, “You must be tired. You must need a warm blanket and a good sleep.”

“Yes, I think you’re right,” he said.

“The elevator will come again,” she said and paused, hearing herself provoking him. She realised she did not like him. She did not like the pomposity evinced by the directness of his gaze. “It will come just before the sun sets.”

He looked irritated. He glanced at the shaft, pulled up his sleeve and examined the watch, “Are you joking?”

“I am not joking, no. Why would I be joking? This is not your city any more.”

Buddy Kelly had felt something welling inside him ever since he had witnessed that miserable exodus on the road. It was not anger, not exactly, and it was not exactly sadness either. It was yet directionless, brimming up inside his chest, a colourless froth.

He hadn’t cried for as long as he could remember, not actively anyway. Passively, yes, to fill a bathtub. But not ardently, not purposefully, not like the prolonged and vigorous spates to which Claire had often succumbed, from which she had emerged red-eyed but apparently fresh and disentangled.

When the dampness on Buddy’s lower-lids had happened to coalesce into drops, into onion tears which would run down his cheeks, it had always been catalysed by strange things. When people sung the anthems before an international sports event, for example. Or else, by ostensibly happy things: children on TV singing together or clapping for all the toys donated to their orphanage at Christmas; old people reunited at a bus terminal. So, maybe it was that – he hadn’t even cried after she had died.

But then, Buddy Kelly hadn’t gone off his rocker either. He hadn’t become furious for a long time. Sometimes rude beggars had harassed him. They had pulled his shirt and followed him for blocks and he had resolved to swear and curse them away, and he had remembered his resolve and wondered why he hadn’t enraged long after the vexing party had run down the street to show off to their friends how much Buddy had given them. And the steam was building ruthlessly now, and it could have gone that way, too. And the dam would eventually break but not now, because she was right, this was not the place from which he had come.

Aunty Trisha observed as his eyes suddenly softened, his brow suddenly turned meek and he said simply, “That’s a long time to wait.”

“Not *that* long, young man,” said Aunty Trisha.

She knew herself so well, yet was surprised by the malice dripping from her words, surprised that she had lost her temper. She looked at Buddy Kelly, who was unsure of what to do, and scolded herself for her insensitivity. She realised she might have been too harsh.

She said, "You've come to join your father."

He looked at her. 'How do you know?' was the question his open mouth and those two wet organs unequivocally posed.

How did she know? And she thought: that's better, feeling slightly amused by the force of her pride, her uncompromising pride. That's better, she thought, and felt, at that moment, chirpy and generous, and neglected to notice the water splashing up onto her nose.

"I am Aunty Trisha, child. I am the oldest woman in Azania. And I am a wise old woman. So many years, child," (She considered coughing for effect, decided it would be too much of a compromise), "but I know many things."

His assertiveness had disappeared. His eyes had become agitated, alarmed, and no longer confronted hers but looked down and around, flicked back to her and away to flash, uncomprehending, from thing to astonishing thing. He had pulled off his hat and was kneading it between his slender fingers.

Aunty Trisha deepened her tone. This happened naturally, but she witnessed the change with approval. "Your father is waiting for you. He is waiting right at the very top of this building."

She stood and walked around the desk. She allowed him to loop his arm under hers. They walked towards the mattresses and she wondered who was supporting who? She thought, he is too weak to be Anazi's heir.

"You must rest now," she said.

He fell onto the bed and she picked up a folded woollen blanket from beside it and handed it to him.

"Do not be concerned. I will wake you when it is time."

Buddy Kelly took the blanket and looked worryingly at all the curled up men snoring and tossing glibly in their sleep. They were sprawled across the long mattress, which was near the fire, and which spread to the wall of pillars (which had some pieces of mountain visible through its open crosses). After this brief excursion, his eyes seemed, upon their return to Trisha, somehow fortified, somehow strong once more. He lifted his faintly stubbled chin and motioned it to the far north wall and said, "I don't understand. Why don't you live out there?"

She sat beside him and pushed him gently backwards. She tucked the blanket in around him.

“There was a worker named Ishmael. A young and handsome man, much like you.”

The dawn was grey and its light drizzling. She sought the comforting sight of her empty desk, realised she must be tired also.

“Like you, he had come from a different place,” she said, “but unlike most of the people here, he was forced to stay put in the middle floors – which you will pass. But he could not find peace there. Eventually, he managed to escape, perhaps with the help of others, perhaps alone. In any case, he managed to make his way down here, where he stayed for a while and worked with me. He asked me many questions, like the one you have just asked.” She sighed wearily and adjusted her headscarf.

Buddy Kelly had taken his pill and was listening but half of him was already somewhere else.

“He told me that he was an Imam. He told me that, although displaced from his world, he was still an Imam here. He told me what that meant and how his religion, in many ways, involved the same sorts of things we believe in here. He said he had seen a tall minaret, which was still standing, down in the ruins below. He pointed it out to me and maybe you will find it when you get the chance to see the view. And before he left he swore to me that if he made it there and, if it was safe, he would perform his strange song, his call to prayer, five times in a day, and I would hear it clearly, echoing off the mountain.”

Buddy Kelly had closed his eyes and Auntie Trisha smiled to herself, suddenly fond of Azania's hope. And then she sang for him and for the other dreaming men, part of a song which her mother had sung for her:

*The time when we feel bad
The time when we feel sad
If we have a song
That can't be all that be bad
The time when we feel lost
The time when we feel not strong
If we have a song
Then things will not be bad*

“Well, Mandla,” she said after she had finished, when Flapjack's motors was lining the silence unchallenged once more, “we have heard nothing from the Imam.”

My boy.

It was Winch.

My boy. What a waste.

He wasn't speaking. He was shaking his head. His figure was dark and hard-edged, his features occluded, but it was Winch. His telepathic rebuke was wordless, yet made its meaning through the stringed beads of emotion stirred in its conferee. Buddy was shouting, crying, disappointed too, but he was a screaming spirit locked in the black folds of a dumb puppet.

What life does that leave you if you spend all your time dreaming, boy. What a waste.

Buddy Kelly had been complaining about his insomnia but Winch was shaking his heavy skull from side to side, cutting the shapeless static with his mammoth, grizzled jaw. His father was disappointed, and they communed without a sound. It was a rainy weekday. Buddy had woken up at noon. It was school holidays.

He was waking up. The thin grey light seeped like mist around him, indistinct, blotchy shadowed, and his muddled thoughts were protesting that he should rejoin reality so soon.

He was sweating but the light was cool. He was still in his suit, clutching the blanket, the shirt now sodden and hoiked up into his armpits, and the mattress was empty but for a single supine man. Buddy Kelly felt horribly out of place, like a leper with his lesions, left to convalesce alone. Where had the others gone? And what was that commotion? *I'm sorry*, his mind still bawling. And he heard in his head the dead echo from his screams.

Buddy Kelly sat up and suddenly felt lightheaded. He felt weak and did not detect it, but was yet drunk on the sleepers. The others were mostly by the hearth, standing around the fire. Some of them were sitting in white plastic chairs, holding bowls and plastic cups. They were mostly looking at him, visibly bemused (had he been screaming aloud?). The rest of them peered toward the elevator hoistway, and he discerned Aunt Trisha moving amongst them.

“Get the ladder,” she was wailing. “Oxford? *Quickly!*”

He did not know these people but he felt in his stomach an urgent ache and his senses affixed to a dense, savoury smell wafting through the air, which was hearty and tempting. Just then, his belly voiced its swing vote in a long, rippling growl.

Buddy removed his jacket and laid it across his satchel. He pulled on his Gatsby hat (because it made him feel more like Winch) and walked over to the crowd.

Aunty Trisha was darting from one man to the next, stopping to shake one of them and clucking, accosting another who might be more responsive. As Buddy Kelly approached, the vague semi-circle opened up for him. The men turning to face him nodded, said, "Hello, Hello," making room for him in their number. A few stepped forward, lining up to shake his hand.

They were crowded around the stone-masonry hearth. Their attention was split between Buddy Kelly and Aunty Trisha and the state of the empty bowls they presented to the cook.

A black cauldron was hanging from a chimney-crane above the pulsating wood-fire, and a young woman dipped her ladle into its mouth. Buddy Kelly watched, engrossed, as she withdrew from the steam a healthy scoop of thick bean and mealie soup. It was unusual that Buddy should stand staring, just now licking his lips (was there a hint of cumin?), eyes twinkling, displaying so unashamedly his desperate craving – being surrounded by strangers as he was – but he had forgotten the dream and forgotten that perhaps he should make an introduction and certainly that he should be intimidated or, in the least, anxious. Maybe it was the sleeping-pill high, its pleasant censorship, but that soup smelled damned good, and as he watched it swing through the steam and empty into a bowl, there was nothing that concerned him more than the thought of it warmly surrounding his tongue, dribbling into his gut, and the actions that might lead to this thought's actualisation.

But then – it must have been obvious – the man next to him, who was short and wearing a car-company-branded beanie high on his hair, handed him his fare. This short man then shooed another off one of the chairs. He brought it round behind Buddy Kelly for him to sit.

Buddy Kelly sat down and began, quite happily but for burning his tongue, shovelling the stodgy stuff into his mouth. He even gave a satisfied, "Mmmm," (definitely some pepper, maybe paprika?) and said, "This is *damn* good soup," while raising the bowl to the woman, who smiled pleasantly in response. The short man then offered Buddy a cup of sweet rice wine, bowing slightly and bringing an imaginary cup up to his lips as if to show the newcomer what he might do with it.

"This is *my* brew," he said, and Buddy Kelly thanked him and then gradually his surrounds recommenced their nagging; presenting the facts of their shapes to pester him once more.

Meanwhile, the man called Oxford had trotted off – Aunty Trisha's insistence had finally succeeded – and was making his way to the shaft, navigating the myriad sacks and bundles and planks, with a long wooden ladder under his arm. Buddy Kelly, loudly processing the chunky broth, watched casually as the slender man propelled the ladder with his strong arms out across the square hole in the floor, so that its end came down with a thunk, just spanning the square sinkhole, and skidding a short way on the other side.

Oxford then looked back at Aunty Trisha. She had made her way to the close end of the ladder and was standing with arms crossed, tapping her foot, looking up to the ceiling. Oxford bounced his weight onto the ladder, as if to show her it was secure.

The short man, now standing next to Buddy Kelly, was looking down at him expectantly, presumably waiting for appraisal of his batch. The others had their vision glued – along with a few heads poking out from the hole in the ceiling – to the curious sight drifting into view from above the impromptu bridge.

Sinking slowly through the centre of the aperture, came first the steel brackets, followed closely by nine long lead bars, around which the former items were fastened tightly. The mass sunk lethargically: as if sliding over the four cables which ran through its middle.

This was the counterweight – as Flapjack might have better explained, adding, for example, that it resembled a strip of chocolate blocks from a bar of *75% Cocoa* he had once found (and after he had ripped off the silver foil to its border), if he were not, just now, putting thoughtfully across another floor. The cables, strung beneath the weight, and also protruding from its top in an evenly spaced horizontal row, had the appearance of taut banjo strings emerging from that instrument's tailpiece. The weight was travelling – as was its function to perpetually do – which meant the elevator was travelling, too – at its single speed of 27 millimetres per second.

And Buddy watched, munching incessantly and absent-mindedly, like one does during the opening scene of a horror film at the cinema, but then he paused. His lips shaped into a hoop which seemed to say, “Oh,” for he had finally seen what the jutting heads from above had seen two minutes and sixteen seconds ago, which happened to be this: a thin little girl in a summer dress (which had short puff sleeves), with two big scrubs like tumbleweeds billowing out from the sides of her head, sitting on the top of the weight. She clung onto the cables as if hugging the neck of a merry-go-round pony. She was also sporting a gleeful, gap-toothed smile.

Aunty Trisha stood remonstratively tapping her foot for the full two and some minutes that it took until the little girl had hopped onto the ladder. Buddy's bowl had by this stage

been refilled. The girl skipped across the bridge's rungs, at which point the old woman shouted passionately, her voice cracking in a clash of anger and relief, "Pin!" she shouted, "You little ... you little something else!"

The men were laughing and Buddy Kelly smiled. He made a sort of 'ahe' sound, quickly wiping a tear from under his eye.

He watched as Pin skipped up to Aunty Trisha and produced a short black rod with a handle from behind her back. The object had been slotted in between her lovely summery dress (with its striking vertical pink stripes) and the pink cotton band encircling her waist, as she had straddled the descending counterweight. She then ran over to Trisha's *Bureau* and held the thing out at arm's length. She squinted her eyes and half turned away from it as she pressed the little button which made the umbrella pop open. Pin pointed to the desk and then to the ceiling, and the old woman took the umbrella and lowered it carefully into the vase.

The skinny girl, who must have been about eleven, then turned around and beamed a smile at the men ("Clever madam!" one shouted), her unruly pigtail bobs sticking out like Mickey Mouse ears. Oxford was clapping loudly. But her smile faded briskly as she caught sight of Buddy Kelly – as did his, watching hers disappear.

Aunty Trisha pushed her gently at her back and she began a serious, arm-swinging march all the way to where she stopped just in front of his chair, to stare him sternly in the eye.

Thus, Buddy Kelly had not only those of the little madam, but what felt like *all* the eyes of the third floor (and a few from above) focused on him, which is not, as you will know by now, a position he liked to assume if he could possibly avoid it. But he had drained the cup of its sweet contents, and his state of mind was still being wonderfully and unwittingly altered with that hypnotic personal detachment which was, along with mild amnesia (as Buddy would reflect on in a few hours), a well-documented side-effect of the Pentobarbital – of course, when all is as it should be you are mostly asleep when these occur – and so he crossed his arms and screwed up his face in caricatured mockery of the little girl's grumpiness (he would wonder later if he actually went "Hmrphh,"). He then gave a smile, stupid and benign, his thick eyebrows slanting downwards comically from above his nose, as if to say, "Okay, now what?"

Pin's uppity poise adjusted to this show of good spirit and she had to really concentrate to stifle the big smile which threatened to overtake her. She lifted a finger, her big eyes soft and beautiful now, and cast it up at Buddy Kelly's round newsboy cap.

The other men were murmuring and jostling. One said, “Hey, this boy's in trouble now.”

Just then, Buddy Kelly swiped his hat off his head. He stretched its elastic between his hands so that he could fit it around her bushfire pigtailed. It was just able to enclose the wild tufts, but now Pin was making a show of grinding her teeth together and cringing. And then suddenly, to much gasping, one balloon ear sprung out from the side. Some of the men guffawed uproariously, snorted and clicked. And so the hat would lie, with its short brim skew; a bigger grey twin to the brambly black pouf atop her little round head.

She stuck out her hand and Buddy shook it heartily, smiling, “Pleasure to meet you, Pin,” said he, and Buddy Kelly did not know it then, but in this moment a meaningful friendship had been solidified. For she had seen into Buddy Kelly, seen his kindness and, as few more than children tend to do, believed it was real. She had seen, fluttering deep in his retinas, a trait it would never cross her mind to doubt (despite what they would go through), because she had seen it here in his eyes and across his oval face. It was something as real as his skin and lips and diminutive ears: she had identified his good and courageous spirit. She had seen it – if only *he* could – because his aspect was at last unguarded by doubt, and she cantered off back to check on her old Aunty and the success of their contraption.

Perhaps it was the chemical stupor that had occluded from her the evidence of his keen self-loathing, the worry and soggy turmoil, but then, maybe Pin had the gift to see around it. For Buddy Kelly had lost a father and he was here because some part of him insisted he was to blame. And he had lost his little sister in that exponentially more crushing and permanent way. And part of him – piled under layer upon layer of denial, so that he wouldn't think of her, wouldn't even allow himself a memory, a picture so he might mourn – was certain that, although he had loved her deeply, he was to blame for that, too.

Buddy Kelly did not think any of this. But a part of him – a distant, sunken force in his brain – was working to abolish his helplessness. It animated his muscles, worked his joints, forged and filtered his thoughts and wetted his eyes, pushing him shyly on to find and fill that scene where the revelation would be forced upon him. But he did not plot nor scheme and, in a way, the flimsy grasp his mind now exerted on its incumbent's situation, adrift and frivolous as the drugs had made it, reflected the young man's general position of disorientation amidst the forces that both drove and limited his life.

He sat and was happy not to think too clearly, that the voice was low and indistinct. And his unharried gaze was quietly commandeered, and began tracing a slow path through the men, past the toolstand hung with broom, spade and tongs, across the

stonework mantle, the funnelling smoke-catchment and arching flue, over the hearth's half-wall sides of stepped stone and across the plain design of the cast-iron fireback, past the cauldron to the black grate like the charred ribs of a beached ark upon which lay, popping and crackling, the insidious, thrumming allure of flame.

He leaned in and admired the fire, and the men beside him seemed content to do the same. And by and by his short attendant, still by his side, leaned forward and said quietly, "It's good to have you back."

To Buddy Kelly, this was a confused and inaccurate thing to say, but so great was his immersion in the surreality of his immediate world, so distracted was he by the potent combustion of the logs, that all that came to his red flashing throat to say was, "Thanks."

"He doesn't know you, chatterbox," said a man in black pleated trousers and green cardigan, sitting beyond the blaze.

"Maybe," said Shorty, "maybe that's what you think," he seemed to stammer and turned back to Buddy, "but I do know you."

Buddy Kelly turned to face the man in the beanie, regarded him curiously, "I don't think so," he said.

"He means your name. Your name, Shorty," the sitting man said, clearly peeved, "He doesn't know who *you* are."

Buddy inspected Shorty's excited countenance, his big lips and smooth skin, the fire flicking in the whites of his eyes, "I don't know you," Buddy said.

"Well, I know you," Shorty said. "We've known each other for a long time. You are the man that men like me must follow. We've known each other for thousands of year. Men like Fela must follow," he indicated the sitting man who had spoken with a jab of his head, who had, above his piercing stare, a heavy, rumbled brow.

"Not me," Fela said hotly. "Not me Shorty. I know men but I do not know this one. I know what men do, but Shorty, you are like a little girl. You are scared of the dark. I know Shorty, you are afraid of being thrown outside. I am sorry, man, but he thinks you are his *Saviour*? Ha! Shorty and his philosophising."

"No, Fela," Shorty said, "you are the one who is afraid. Afraid if you let go of your hate you might discover that there was no reason, all this time, and there was no reason for it."

"You are right, Shorty," Fela said, standing up violently so the chair flipped over behind him, "but I have reason. People like you who hide from truth. You think this boy will save you?" he flapped his hand at Buddy and broke into an ugly laugh. "You've known him for so long? Your saviour from the dark?"

Fela clicked his tongue in dismissal, “You can't be saved Shorty. But you are right: you are a man who must follow. But you can't be saved. Because you don't see that this is as good as it will get for you, that this boy will slit your throat to save himself before he gives a thought about poor Shorty. Don't make me laugh so hard Shorty, it hurts me.”

Fela stamped off to the stack of boxes by the west wall. He began lifting some of the ones that Auntie Trisha had ear-marked with her coloured stickers, onto his shoulder, and carried them over to the pillars by the shaft.

“Listen,” Shorty said, breaking the embers with a poker, “all I mean is that we are glad you have returned.” He tossed a few fresh logs onto the grate. “Don't worry about this guy, Fela. Fela's all bark. He's just losing faith, afraid because it feels like our Lord has forsaken us lately, with ... with everything that has been going on”.

Buddy Kelly was suddenly aware that he did not know these people at all. Yet, still mesmerised by the fire, he seemed strangely unconcerned.

“You're right. I know you, Shorty,” Buddy said quietly. “We're all just the same.”

They sat in silence for a time.

Gradually the residents broke away from the warmth of the hearth to join Fela in preparing for the evening shift, the woman removing the pot, so that soon just a handful of figures remained.

Buddy Kelly, who been toying with the idea of asking Shorty any one of the large set of burning questions which had formed in his mind since the latter's tiff with Fela, since his arrival on the dark road, decided rather to curtail his curiosity for the time being. He thought to leave be the easy familiarity already established – with an inquisition bound to highlight their difference – and hence instead addressed the mundane (but now most urgent) issue to do with the location of the tower's ablution facilities.

Shorty led him to the bathroom over in the north-east. There was a row of toilets in stalls opposite six waist-level taps with large buckets under each, which sat on a section of the sloping floor, with a drain at its centre. The whole area was walled in browning hardboard. Shorty left him for a short spell and returned, to Buddy's relief, with a roll of toilet-paper as well as his satchel.

Buddy Kelly found soap by the taps, one of which released tepid water, and filled a bucket and bathed. He was tweaked by arousal as the water, cast from his hands, splashed over his body. He cleaned his teeth and emerged feeling crisp, in a pair of dark jeans and his white hoody, and found to his surprise, as he returned to the mattress, that his dress-shirt and socks had been washed and were drying by the fireside.

The dreary afternoon light was darkening, the air being cold, and the noise from rough machines and the hushed bedlam of Azania's countless voices powdered down the tower's axis.

The others had long been working in earnest by the time the elevator came. Buddy Kelly, dallying about, had taken the time to observe. He had since deduced two things for certain.

The first: Aunty Trisha was solidly in charge.

She had spent a fair amount of time (with the help of another, younger woman) pasting little round stickers onto quantities of select goods. She had taken these stickers from the sheets of six different colours which she had carried under her arm. The women had designated a permutation of three coloured circles to each parcel.

Aunty Trisha had then returned to her desk, where she sat now – the drip thankfully mollified. She began to lunge at its many holds (seemingly at random) as if each contained a separate component necessary for the completion of a complex circuit. The frenetic movements of her hands, the targets at which they bolted (to pull open and grab and snap shut), relinquished the multiple parts necessary for the creation of a sort of tactician's map in front of her, a huge spread of colours and symbols. According to this plan, she bellowed out orders – “Desroy, red-blue-white!”, “Fela, red-red-green!” – standing up and tapping a foot when she had to repeat herself. And the strong couriers danced to her orders, jogging to and fro, lifting and hauling the assorted goods to the lip of the shaft without hesitation.

The second thing which Buddy Kelly had deduced was a simple corollary of the first: that the task was immense; that Aunty Trisha was a master of logistics.

And so, by the time the elevator came, each man was sweating and yet, thanks to Trisha's meaningful (but not uncompanionable) authoritarianism, remained unflustered. The workers now knew precisely what to do (if they hadn't before) for her quivering old voice had unequivocally told them. They also knew what the deeds ahead of them entailed; their tasks concerning the arrival of that most important platform.

Buddy Kelly, as conscientious as he was, had tried to help, albeit very unsuccessfully. He had sauntered over to the stack of planks (labelled: red, red, green) and picked up one side of a wad of the heavy beams (with Fela on the other). Almost immediately, however, a nasty splinter had embedded itself into his soft hands. He had stopped to suck his teeth but the cargo had been dragged out of his grip – resulting in another respectable splinter. Hence, it became clear that all his involvement could possibly add to the calculated flurry,

was the impediment of another object to manoeuvre around. So he sidled up to one of the concrete pillars of the core, and set about nursing his augmented fingers instead. Here he stood, letting the whole, busy orchestration occur around him – like a human-statue on a busy square in time-lapse.

Buddy Kelly looked up to the approaching square. It seemed to fit almost exactly the dimensions of the shaft – that is to say, 7x7 metres. As it crawled downwards, he saw the four extensible loops of travelling cable (which were now small), slung through the gears and pulleys at its undercarriage of steel girders and trusses. He noted that the lift was different from the floor on which he stood in that it lacked the layer of concrete on its top. Instead, the structure was covered in a tight mesh of metal – through which he could see, where there happened to be no one standing or object resting, little diamonds of unobstructed light.

There was a rectangular hole in the platform's middle, through which the four counterweight cables inched upwards. There was also an intricate and manifold mechanism (a type of hitch plate perhaps, Flapjack would have known better) whereby the other four ropes fed into the travelling cable, attached stalwartly to the girders of the square's foundation, and yet continued downwards, out its bottom, in their perfect horizontal array.

Buddy Kelly then noticed, down to his immediate right, an eight-sectioned grey-sphere with a button at its middle, which was tangent to a black bob that had the appearance of a tarred-and-feathered ice-cream scoop – which all equated the top of Pin's head. The little girl had been similarly admiring the elevator's posterior (stroking her round chin like Buddy, too). She now looked up at him, serious-faced, and he saw that, pinned to the front of his annexed cap, was the golden archer broach. The last time he had thought of this object, it had been securely implanted into his jacket lapel.

Buddy Kelly then remembered Winston and Kops. He remembered the rifle. This emblem was his clearance tag, his VIP pass.

He crouched onto his haunches and said, ever so sweetly, “I almost forgot. Thanks for bringing that over little one, I'll just--” but as he reached for the cap she stepped back and Buddy Kelly fell forward onto his hands.

She shook her head sympathetically. He made a little dash at her but she scampered out of reach like a gamesome retriever, and, just then, Aunty Trisha doddered over to them with her clipboard.

“Pin?” Buddy Kelly was saying to the child, with as much soft integrity as his scruples (pertaining to reprimanding children) allowed. “Pin. Hey!”

“Don't bother. She's not big on words,” Aunty Trisha was saying under her breath. “You'll never catch her so don't even try. No one can. (Johnny! Black-black-black for Buhle!) They've given up. You'll come across little rascals like this one around here. Uncertified. But don't worry about your things. (Baba, red-blue-red!). Pin's an angel, aren't you? Yes, no, but *you* don't worry. This one will see you safely to the top.”

By now the elevator was just a metre from the floor, and of its visible occupants and chattel, Buddy Kelly was most intrigued by two dogs, who looked healthy but unclassifiable, sleeping by the long counter that ran along its eastern edge.

Suddenly, Buddy Kelly jerked upright, into his default, top-heavy bearing, as a mob of about twenty men, in all their multifarious apparel (like a grand fusion, a scandalous collaboration of fashion through the decades), jumped off from all sides of the lumbering thing. Most were carrying big plastic bags, one a pot, another a gas cylinder. They dispersed throughout the storey, barely acknowledging their cohabitants. Aunty Trisha, meanwhile, was marking checks on her list, barking out colour codes.

“Where's Manny?” she said after a moment.

“He stayed on with Queenie,” came a voice, to which she did not react well. She shouted, quite frighteningly, into the overhead void, “Pushing your *luck!*” as if her voice might perforate the pandemonious din and reach whichever distant storey he happened to be on, which, of course, it wouldn't.

Soon the platform was just about levelled with the ground. This prompted a number of men (including Shorty) to hop up onto the grating.

These ten or so men then began receiving the endless string of things thrown to them from the others, who had formed up into bucket-relay lines. They passed the boxes and sacks to one another with much calling and chatter, which continued – items being tossed into the hole – long after the elevator had sunken out of sight.

“Oxford,” Trisha said.

The lean man stepped forward. He was smiling broadly, knowingly, gripping the wrist of his open left hand with his right. Aunty Trisha fished something out from the crease in her head-scarf and placed it in his palm; a tiny faceted gem, translucent and colourless, like a diamond. Oxford dipped in a gesture of gratitude and Aunty Trisha scowled at him and shook her head.

“You can tell Manny that's a black dot,” she said while roughly scribbling the aforementioned blemish into the top page of her clipboard.

And then a most curious moment transpired.

If you have ever been lucky enough to leave your Dalphiney and observe elephants in one of the reserves, you might know of a puzzling phenomenon which materialises every so often. The beasts, busy tromping in a row, tail to trunk, or splashing in a mud-pool, suddenly freeze. If they had been walking their lifted feet remain in the air, if spraying water, their trunks remain coiled, and they have frozen, mid-scene, as if now merely a tableau in a museum. Biologists conjecture that perhaps they are listening; to a call of such low frequency, it is inaudible to most animals.

Well, what happened on Aunty Trisha's storey was much like that. The moment was triggered by a dull, hydraulic clunk, and then suddenly, for a remarkable couple of seconds, a part of the fracas was silenced. That far-off whirring had stopped, and Buddy Kelly realised that there had been, all this time, that rumbling undertone assaulting his calm. But now, all at once, he heard a loud, grating cough, laughter, a plate breaking, crying, boisterous singing, hammering and grinding, a long, painful scream; like the echoes of a madhouse. He heard the mass of noise from a vast population above in the throes of life, and another, of a smaller species, squeaking and scuttling below. And he heard a concert of pigeon coos as they nestled down by the vestigial colour of the defeated day. And in that moment everyone seemed to freeze, mid-step, to listen.

Soon, however, the churning was back.

“Fela!” Aunty Trisha yelled.

The brawny man looked up.

“You'll escort this young man to him.”

“Whatever you say, Aunty,” said Fela.

“Him?” said Buddy Kelly, who still couldn't quite work out how she had known about his real intentions. As far as he knew, she should have thought him on a simple business errand – ‘to observe and to listen,’ so the first page in the folder instructed. And so he pounced on this opportunity to further his understanding.

Aunty Trisha drew her eyes away from her register to regard him, from under her wrinkled brow, with mild irritation.

“Your father,” she said as if it was obvious.

“Who *is*?”

“Ananzi.”

“Aunty Trisha,” said Buddy Kelly, gently now, not wanting to disappoint her, yet believing himself the victim of mistaken identity he ought set right, “that's not him. That's not my father.”

This time she did not look up when she spoke. “Go child,” she said plainly, “You will remember.”

In what seemed like no time, the lift was emerging once more. Buddy Kelly noticed that Pin was again by his side, with his bag slung over her shoulder, hanging just off the ground.

The transient depot of marked produce, which had been built around the columns of the building's middle, was now depleted. A few of the men, who had been in the convey line, sprang onto the lift with the remaining parcels in their hands.

Buddy Kelly, having anticipated this moment for some time, stepped elegantly up onto the platform, like a cocky traveller boarding a moving train. He was joined by Pin, Buhle (the woman who had cooked the soup) and Fela, who carried a single white patio chair. Fela placed this next to the platform's central shaft, under a glowing gas lantern affixed to one of the cables.

“Go well,” Aunty Trisha said as they commenced the ascension.

She looked up, gave a terse wave with her clipboard and then she seemed to panic. She quickly scanned the item in her hand, snapped, “Shorty! What are you *doing*?”

“I’ll look after --” but before he could finish, Fela had shouldered him off the platform.

Aunty Trisha, to whom Pin was waving lethargically, ignored Shorty wincing on the floor. She made a check on her checklist.

And thus the first leg of the long journey up through Azania began in the semi-darkness.

Buddy Kelly went over to the chair. It seemed the best place to be, for the twenty-strong team of workers was still feverishly manipulating the extensive load. They were placing the items with the farthest to go near the platform's middle, and vice versa.

Pin followed Buddy. He offered his pretty ally the seat. She ignored him (but climbed stealthy onto it after a few minutes). Buddy Kelly felt touched by admiration – which made him blink twice and wipe his eyes (under the guise of straightening his thick eyebrows) – as he watched these people so diligently about their communal fidelity. He felt admiration for the unquestioning kindness they had extended him.

On the lift, Buhle fired up the gas stove. With the able aid of her six sous-chefs, she began chopping onions from a sizeable mound. The prepared vegetables joined with oodles of mince in six large pots.

Buddy Kelly felt quite cheerful. He pointed nonsensically to the cooks' procedures, as if explaining something to the teensy girl in her own terms. He even whistled quietly to the big, motley dogs. Their ears unflapped and swished to catch the sound, but their eyes remained closed – which, on reflection, Buddy Kelly was quite relieved about, after seeing the one's snaggle-toothed gums, and remembering the old adage.

This was it, he thought.

He reminded himself to keep a look out for any sign of Winch (though it would scarcely be possible to make out his face in the dark). But then, if Winch was on one of the upper floors, his massive stature would surely expose him, and, of course, Buddy's face would be visible by the lamp. And then, maybe Aunty Trisha's insight had been correct. Maybe that's what they called Winch around here: 'Anazi'. If this was the case, Fela would escort Buddy all the way to him.

They passed the fourth floor and more indigens stepped aboard with more packaged goods. Some paused to look at Buddy. These men gave short, odd smiles, almost of recognition.

Buddy Kelly saw that this floor, displayed in the trembling glow from the fire, had a layout very similar to the one from which he had just come. Most of the space was designated for the collection of wares, and there was a single large mattress in the corner. There was a bathroom enclosure, and the storey even had a large desk, manned by a

young chap in a baseball cap, although it was not as elaborate as Auntie Trisha's. The floor had a series of thick and thin ramp mouths, and fifty or less residents, who were spread assiduously amongst the stations and across the bed.

They cruised on. They passed the fifth floor. Five more workers stepped on.

Buddy Kelly pointed dumbly to one of the four-wheeled bogies. These devices had coil-spring suspension and their c-shaped bearings (like a lego man's arm, Buddy Kelly thought) slid along the flanged guideway rails running the length of the corner pillars. Pin, inspired by Buddy's absorption, eagerly pointed out the other three ... past the sixth floor. Only three new passengers.

In no time, the impressive contraption was crowded with bodies jostling between the bags and boxes which were now piled high. Buddy Kelly shivered (and Pin shivered, too) because there was no fire here, only the vague warmth from the lamp by his head, and from the stove plates and simmering pots of the counter (under which the dogs were curled). But then a thick blanket landed on each of Buddy's shoulders, which Fela had been kind enough to distribute. Buddy Kelly wrapped Pin up in the soft, cornflower-blue one, before cloaking himself in white.

"Thanks," Buddy said.

"Sure," Fela said, and then coldly, "my Liege."

Buddy Kelly disregarded Fela's quip. He looked back to the passing floors. Seven. Eight.

As they rose to the level of the tenth, Buddy Kelly saw a group of shoes fitted to an equally large number of pant legs. He saw extended hands, holding out empty platters. He saw faces, so many diverse and unknowable faces, of men and women, mostly adult.

The chefs quickly filled these outstretched trays with the meat from their pots, and the people were saying, "Meat!", "What a day!", almost as if to themselves, and Buddy Kelly thought he heard someone say, "That's him," before they turned away. These folk took the hot supplement back to the many others gathered at the hearths, to join with the rice for their dinner.

Buddy then noticed that there were two fires on this floor. One was by the southern, mountain side, the other, on the side of the old city to the north. And the elevator edged on by.

On the eleventh floor it was the same: a mass waiting by the counter, an eager bustle, empty trays, excited nattering, revisited rumours, people on the beds, and here, were row upon row of empty benches. And there was a line of big, inactive machines, of which Buddy Kelly couldn't imagine the use. A man from Trisha's floor jumped off the platform with a box under his arm and a sack on his shoulder – both items marked with two blue

and one yellow sticker. He greeted some of the milling figures before disappearing among their dark shapes. There he remained.

And the lift glided by, twelve, thirteen. More men stepped off. There were three fires now, and throngs of people. Some were sleeping, other were playing 'China' and craps. A couple was fighting raucously, more were laughing. Fourteenth floor, Fifteenth. And Buddy Kelly heard a child crying (the first he'd encountered aside from Pin) and a woman singing a gentle song, "*The time when we feel lost, the time when we feel ...*" and it sounded strangely familiar ... and they drifted by, individuals preparing for sleep. Sixteenth. Telling stories of God, tales of a people beset by catastrophe.

He was amazed by the sheer numbers of the inhabitants, by the way each floor seemed to be a self-sufficient world, strangely self-involved, almost ghostly, a world of shadows and voices, so many voices. Seventeen. Eighteen.

By the time they had reached the twentieth floor, they had been travelling for over thirty minutes, and the numbers on the lift were marginally reduced. A small fraction of the boxes and bags and lumber had been removed.

Buddy Kelly looked down the open hole beside him, into the darkness. He was about to clasp one of the cables for support when Fela suddenly interjected, "Uh-uh," he said, "not that one. I've seen someone hold that one. And that was the last time I seen him."

Buddy Kelly checked – it was slithering in the wrong direction (at 54 millimetres per second) – and instead of finding another cable which would be more appropriate, he returned his hands to the back of Pin's chair. And they reached another floor and another – Buddy Kelly had lost count – and on each, there were empty trays waiting in front of the counter, and now Johnny disembarked, burdened with goods.

"They're talking about you," came Fela's voice.

Buddy turned to look at him.

"You see there?" he nodded at the small crowd. "They're talking about you."

Buddy looked back and saw a man nudge his friend. He saw a woman searching for his eyes, nodding serenely.

"Go well," she called to him, waving her arm broadly.

Buddy Kelly was starting to feel uneasy; there were all the time voices.

"They've been waiting for you," Fela said.

Pin swung her head around to glower at him.

Fela hissed in response to the little girl's scowl. He said: "You want to know why they all work so hard? Not working all the time, but all the time working, it is hard. Working, every day, *so* hard."

“Why?” Buddy Kelly asked, a light belligerence to his tone. “Won't you tell me? Why do they work so hard?”

“They work so hard, because if they do not, their Master will forsake them. There is only one way to peace, and that is to work. To produce. To produce and produce and you better mind who you fuck too. But look! They are relieved now that they have seen you.”

They passed another floor. The crowd was slightly larger. Now, it seemed that those who gathered by the shaft were not only there to collect food. They elbowed each other, pointed at Buddy Kelly. He felt self-conscious and looked away.

“How do they know?” asked Buddy Kelly. “How do they know we're coming before they see us?”

“Well. Really, it's simple,” he said toyingly, “they listen. The same way how you know most everything you know. They listen. You can hear it also. Azania's spirit is everywhere. You hear it? The wind is just desire. The energy in the darkness is just desire. These people are all one. You hear their voice?”

Yes. He did. It was like a gridlocked market, burgeoning with voices. Buddy Kelly looked up the shaft: the cables stretched through the diminishing squares for leagues, shrinking into the whispering blackness. What did they want? What did they all want?

Buddy Kelly – being a mite agoraphobic, as he was – had once had a particularly affecting nightmare. In it, he had just woken, lying in his bed in the middle of a colossal hall, which was packed with people, thousands of them, who were all talking, talking to him, surrounding him, and muttering to no one. Talking about themselves, about the unfinished deeds of lives finished off long ago. Yes, it was like that. Talking of the ones they had left behind.

“Our Master has spies all around,” Fela continued in his derisive tone, now more hushed. “They are on every floor and they move around. They pretend to be like everyone else. Hiding those weapons that spout thunder and blood. And if you don't produce, God becomes angry, if you are too old, if you give a woman child, he becomes very angry, and his agents, they are the same as the rest, they must produce results so they are not forsaken. And so, they are watching, all the time watching, and will strike out and fetter your hands. They will take you down to the night. This man in front of you, he could be an agent. This man to your side.”

“What about you?” said Buddy Kelly, staring forward to Azania's hard-edged insides edging by.

Fela laughed brashly, “Yes, maybe you are his son after all. You have to think like a snake to be Aunt Nancy's son. Yes ... maybe, I could be an agent.”

The lift ascended and Buddy Kelly began to notice the series of circular stickers pasted to the southern, middlemost concrete slab of each respective storey's dermis. And, as they passed each floor, men dismounted, trays were filled with meat, and the crowd gathered around the shaft became incrementally greater. These people were looking at Buddy, at his face illuminated by the weak lantern light, and whispering, shouting, "Bless us!", "He is come at last!"

A woman vaulted onto the lift, scrambled over everything and placed her hand on Buddy's head. She dashed off. No one was prepared for this.

And perhaps, superficially, it might appear strange that Buddy Kelly, a professedly unassuming character, with his quiet disposition and his penchant for chronic self-deprecation, began to exhibit a profound transformation as he ascended, draped in white, as he passed floor upon floor. This young man, who was racked with doubt, who hunched from the weight of it, who continually stifled his own thoughts and existed stooped because of an inexplicable morosity, who stuttered his words and so often kept them unspoken in his head; strange that he was now embracing these fawning crowds. Strange that he began to stand up straighter, that his aspect began to embolden. Buddy Kelly, who was ruled by a single, overarching fear that he might just be ordinary, was now defiant.

He began to look to each person ardently, not to appraise them, but to look with them, to communicate with them his heartsickness, confer with them a stark and beautiful acceptance of what it meant to be dying. And this action was so natural, so obvious. His eyes sparkled. They projected a terrible reverence, a love and a sympathy.

But there was a confrontation too, always there in the microscopic adjustments of the flesh around his vision, a confrontation that seemed to say, yes, you *can* be afraid, yes, we can *all* be afraid, but there is part of you that only you know, and I cannot condone your simple and devastating fear just yet, because you know that you have hurt others, that you have enacted evil, that you are human, you are my competitor, my brother, my sister, but also the scourge of the earth.

And they told him that he wasn't ordinary. They told him that he was a prophet, because all they needed was to look into his endlessly crying eyes and speak; to apologise, to thank and hate.

And perhaps it might seem strange (with the plucky high of the sleepers long since worn off), perhaps you might think it mere arrogance; that that is all it ever was. That is all it was, preventing his judgement of others, stoppering his promotion of self, that it was all an arrogance he had wrestled with for all his life, which insisted he realise himself worthy of praise. That Pin had been deceived. Perhaps that is what you think. That

manifest in this mousy veil of goodness was no more than a childish yearning for self-ingratiation. You may be right.

But Buddy Kelly was now busy with a fierce and garrulous internal argument. He was reliving, as evidence, the encounters with all the people he had connected with in his lifetime, and with all these tender faces, which looked and spoke and did not look away until his feet had long drifted out of sight, who smiled, like him, sadly from their eyes, the argument was being trounced to a conclusion that quietly, rationally declared: he must be someone special, someone very special, after all.

Floor upon floor. They wanted to see him. They whispered blessing and ululated.

“They're talking about you,” came Fela's voice from behind Buddy Kelly. He was suddenly sounding hesitant, after over two hours of journeying through the dark.

“I know,” said Buddy Kelly plaintively.

By the time they approached the 57th storey, most of the original crew, those who had boarded the platform on Trisha's floor, were long gone, including one of the dogs. It was the darker, boxy-nosed mutt that had stood up without warning, its ears sprung erect, that had sniffed the darkness emphatically and bounded off to hunt its prey. Of those who remained, none would have known that their arrival at this floor – which they referred to simply as blue-green-white – marked their transcendence of the tower's first third.

Of Buddy Kelly's initial entourage, there remained Oxford with his diamond, and Buhle behind the counter (who was slaving over her pots and flanked by her assistants), and petulant Fela, who had quietened but remained protective of his charge. And of course, there was Pin, now sitting restless and petite against the broad white back of her chair, whose interesting head-dress tilted back every so often, for her to peer up anxiously at her popular new friend.

Doubt had entered Buddy Kelly again like a virus. It had latched onto his clean cells and was dividing mitotically once more, gradually deprecating his ephemeral spate of princely posture back to its expected form. But Buddy Kelly still felt an ecstatic bubbling in the seat of his chest. He still tried to embrace the gazes from the hundreds of congregating witnesses, but turned away now and then. There were just too many – his resolve was waning.

It was then that things swiftly got out of hand.

Just when the platform had begun to feel empty, with the view of Buddy Kelly almost completely unobscured, another twenty-strong team of men jumped aboard. This intimidating insurgence caught only Buddy off guard.

Some of these workers nodded to the cloaked man, but they seemed altogether focused on the distribution of the remaining (yet plentiful) stockpile of goods. They were joined by ten more men from the next floor, a handful from the next. All the while individuals had been stepping off in accordance with Trisha's patterns.

Soon the buzz from the inquisitive flocks had reached fever-pitch. Their members were wailing and cheering. They were beginning to clamber up onto the lift; something most of them had never done before. First, in dribs and drabs, scampering over to Buddy Kelly to touch him, before turning back. But gradually their numbers were swelling into swarms,

and it was becoming harder to differentiate between the handlers and the merely fanatical.

Fela revealed that he was not, in fact, one of the guards. For if he had a weapon he would have been using it to repel the building riot. Buhle and the other chefs stopped cooking and were trying to help fend off the escalating rumpus with their ladles and wooden spoons, and they all, including even Pin (who had always thought of the platform as an uninteresting but incontestable force), began to worry about the lift's maximum load – (had it slowed just now?).

Amidst all this, the befuddled distributors were trying to get on with their jobs. The solitary beige dog was circling its tail and barking. The air was overwrought with noise and shifting shadow, with the presence of the dark faces peeping down from the layers above, and the pleasant smell of Buhle's bolognese had been almost entirely displaced by the odour of tarrying sweat.

They passed blue-green-green. Figures were breaking through the paltry defences, climbing over the counter, darting in from the back. Upon reaching their target, they were confronted by Buddy Kelly's surprised face, and they bestowed upon him their gifts.

Buddy Kelly received lengths of ribbon, a coin and a jelly-bean, a baby's bootie, and then his memory was suddenly jogged, when a young man placed into his hand a small wooden rod, about the length of his pinkie. This rod was sanded beautifully smooth. It was unvarnished, and had, joined at its one end, a curved knob of a lighter wood, shaped like the beak of a flamingo. The knob could swivel; a foot.

“Hey, bra, you okay? You see what you are doing?” said Fela, pushing insurgents firmly off the platform.

It was impossible to keep them all at bay. Some of those who had snuck by were thus forced to leave on a floor that was not their own, among people they had only heard but never seen.

“What are you people doing?” Fela shouted in frustration. “You are going to get lost. You see what you have *done*? You okay? Turn that light off!” he yelled at Buddy Kelly.

“I'm okay,” said Buddy Kelly.

Buddy stoppered the lamp's gas. The lift was plunged into relative darkness.

They passed blue-green-black, the crowds ever more brazen, their besieging ever more intense. It was remarkable: the seed of hysteria seemed to be advancing just ahead of them, stemming to increasing effect as they climbed. More heads, at higher levels, could be seen jutting over the hoistway.

Buddy Kelly was fondling the humble items he had been given. There were one or two bits of sculpted wood which were different from the rod: a flat oval, and a strange, symmetrical blob, which had a perfectly round hole prised out of its middle; the hole, just smaller than a golf ball. A man had crawled up to him (with a sous-chef wrapped around his leg) and put a shiny red bead into his palm, which was marked with a sharp green dot.

But Buddy had received simply dozens of the carefully shaped wooden sticks, so that they were now strewn across Pin and the chair, and across the floor, some falling through the gaps, like driftwood after a collision at sea. He had seen their shapes before, he was sure of it. He had felt them like this in his hands before, and Trisha's words now flooded his mind – *You'll remember* – and Shorty's words, too, and the nightmare.

He experienced an ominous invigoration. He tried to think back to that blind passage of his earliest childhood. He starting collecting the pieces for Pin to stash in his bag, but his effort was hindered when another one of the wooden stumps flew out of nowhere and struck his chin.

He looked to the people on the floor and there, among the crush of gesticulating bodies, caught sight of a face that stood out, with a glowing animus prevalent in its features. This scowling man, Buddy could see, had no interest in interacting, in any civil manner, with his sappy benevolence.

Buddy Kelly watched this man in the dim light as he opened his coat and withdrew something: a weapon, an uzi. The man brought the sight in front of his eye. He brought the stout barrel to point at the man in the white blanket. Buddy ducked but the other had not fired, and, through the last crevasse of the disappearing floor, he saw, while peeping over Pin's rogue pigtail, the man's lips pop, as if emulating bursting bubblegum, before they spread into a cruel smirk.

Buddy's heart was thundering now.

He jumped as a hand wrapped around his arm, wrenching him around. Pin stood up on the chair and began unpeeling the offending fingers. It was a young woman with dark, handsome lips. Her hair was styled into short bantu knots, which were like thick, coiled springs, and she had a tiny baby clasped against her bosom. She looked pleadingly at Buddy, who watched her apprehensively.

She said, "I'm sorry. They want to take her away. They want to take my girl. Please. I'm sorry to --" but she was interrupted as Fela dragged her away from him. "*Please,*" she said and they sailed slowly by.

Buddy Kelly was desperate. He wanted to scream *Stop!* and it was an absurd thing to think in that chaotic moment, but he suddenly wished he had taken the opportunity when

he had felt alone on the path leading from the landing zone (was it only last night?). He wished he had seized the chance to let loose a terrible scream, all of which his lungs and throat were capable, so that he would have known what it would sound like. Now, he did not know if it would work, nor had he the courage.

And he wanted to scream to them: it's all wrong, this is a mistake, I'm not who you think I am. But he feared more than anything, he feared, more than that this proclamation might be a lie – Earls had brought the difference to his attention – but he feared that external property of the statement, over which he had no control. He feared that it might actually be true.

They arrived at another floor, blue-green-blue. They docked for a fraction of a second, and the crowd was waiting.

Some of the handlers had forgotten the boxes. They had renounced their servitude to the coloured dots, and had joined with Fela in stemming the influx. They were staving off the invaders with their strong arms, shouting, “Stay there!” and “He'll be back.”

It was dark but just then a face lit up. It was a young woman standing behind the mob, who had struck a match by her chin. Her visage was flickering in yellow. She was apart from all the others. She was not threatening or rueful. She was beautiful. It was *her*. Buddy Kelly had seen her before.

He walked to the end of the platform, confusion and worry still rife in his expression, and she shouldered through the crowd. She stuck out her hand. He took it.

“Let her on,” Buddy Kelly said to Fela, who was trying to break their monkey-grip.

Pin, meanwhile, was antsy, mounting the chair for vantage.

“Hey, this guy!” Fela said as he retreated. “Perfect time to find yourself a dolly.” He clicked scathingly.

She stepped up to Buddy.

“It's you,” she said.

“Yes,” said Buddy Kelly, “I think it is.”

Everything seemed to quieten. His eardrums were stunned, as if from the shock of a nearby explosion. He noticed the brilliance of her teardrop earrings, the rich green of the gems, their speckles of red, their gold lining. He noticed the soft lobes from which they hung, which were adjoined at the top of her oval jaw.

As they slowly ascended, she pulled him away from the edge of the lift. The platform was now bordered by exasperated workers, like a tag-team of show wrestlers around a ring, readying for the onslaught of the next round.

“This is madness,” she said.

“I know,” said Buddy Kelly, “I’ve seen you before.”

“That’s not what I meant,” she said, mildly peeved and blushing.

Was it on account of the last few tumultuous hours, the glimpse offered then of an alternate history, that he was able to hold her eyes unflinchingly so? Was it the remnant ember from that firestorm of confidence, ignited when his most ardent and secreted wish had flirted with fulfilment, that administered Buddy Kelly this strength?

Her eyes were of a deep, rosewood brown. They were scintillating. The fine eyebrows above were now beginning to arch in mild distress, but he held her eyes strongly with his own. Another wooden limb whipped out of the dark and beamed him on the head. He blinked, suddenly reimmersed in the mayhem, but grinning.

There was something nagging his mind – something other than Pin who had dismounted the chair, who was now tugging on one dangling end of his poncho. A memory. Inexplicably, he was thinking of some type of animal ... canine.

“You’re a ...” he began before the memory was complete, wagging his finger at her accusingly, “you’re a fox.”

He followed this allegation with his versatile 'ahé' sound, while simultaneously putting a hand on top of the wriggling Gatsby hat, in an effort to pacify its little incumbent, inadvertently pushing the cap down over her eyes.

“A jackal, actually,” she said, giving a self-effacing smile.

It came to him. He had seen her on stage at Sliver. But she hadn't been the leading lady – she wasn't Miss Fox. She had been playing the violin. She was a member of the jackal pack. And, somehow, he could see this occult, quarrelsome edge to her. It was discernible in the way her physique was elegant – she stood up straight and had a sleekly feminine build – but, at the same time, she seemed to have a chubbiness to her flushed cheeks, to her arms and thighs. And when she smiled just now, the way in which her front teeth lingered over her bottom lip was sensual, no denying it, but almost vaguely infantile; it brought the word 'chipmunk' to Buddy's mind.

She wore a backpack over a clingy, black sateen-weave top, whose long sleeves were threadbare around where they were perforated by her thumbs. The top followed the globose shelf of her bust, its swoop, up to where the material rolled back upon itself along the curve of the garment's scoop neckline, just below her exposed and pronounced collar bones.

There was this crepuscular quality to her. She had long lashes and lengthy hair, which was curled like black ribbon fallen from a narrow spool, but the fleshy bump under the tip of her nose – her columella – dipped slightly too low, and her eyes were darkly lined

(although it could have been natural) and her mouth, having returned to its native shape as she looked at him appraising her now, was minutely pouting. Her jeans were a metallic jade, and tucked into calfhigh boots, and it all added up to a jackal, and Buddy Kelly thought her gorgeous.

She said: "I wish I got this sort of attention when I played."

He had a moment of panic, imagining his thoughts read. But she had motioned to the wreath of onlookers fighting for a glimpse of him. And now, obscurely, he wished she had recognised that she had rendered him dumb-struck.

"They think I'm someone special," said Buddy Kelly.

"Are you?"

"I don't know," he said. "I guess we'll see."

The woman looked up the shaft; the clank and rumble ever loudening.

"Okay, listen," she said, grabbing a handful of his blanket and pulling him close to her, "the one after the next is the refuge floor. Just follow me. Your friend shouldn't follow."

The big one or the small one? wondered Buddy Kelly. He looked at Pin. She was trying with all her might to appear surly, trying to cross her little arms under the blanket so that her disapproval might be seen, but she was clearly, above all things, frightened. Fela was leaning back, attempting to listen, but they were coming to berth with the 'next one', blue-green-yellow, and he turned away.

They waited.

Soon the wave began, so many ordinary people. The herders drove them back.

Buddy Kelly shouldered his leather satchel. He sunk onto his haunches, gently placing his hands on the sides of Pin's arms, "You stay here little one. Okay?"

Buddy Kelly thought of giving Pin the hat, but he needed the broach, and there wasn't time to facilitate the finicky transfer. Pin, however, had pre-empted his thievery, and had keeled over backwards and twisted out of reach. Buddy Kelly scratched his head. He was startled as a hand wrapped itself around his ankle, but it released as its owner was hauled away.

"What's your name?" the jackal asked. "Your Dalphiney name?" She seemed distracted, busy with an inspection of the assorted boxes and sacks.

"Buddy," he said, "Buddy Kelly. Do I have another one?"

"You might," she said. "I guess we'll see."

Like 'Darling', Buddy Kelly thought.

"Anything you prefer to Jackal?" he said, sounding surprisingly cavalier now, and when her gaze snapped back to him, she was wearing a cheeky smile.

“Ashé,” she said. “The one I prefer. Ashélene.”

She looked up. They had reached the refuge floor.

“You ready Buddy?”

There was a woman on the lift who had dodged the parrying arms, or else they had been occupied with the bulk of others. She had grabbed the leg of the Son but he had hardly noticed. She had wanted to thank him for coming back, and they wouldn't let her, but she had touched him and that was enough. And she had wanted to return to her home, to her friends and family, but the lift had been too high, and so now she was stuck, and the elevator had berthed with the refuge floor.

This floor did not have a waiting congregation. It did not have a colour code. Across its expanse there were no fires. There were just the pillars, the cold concrete and scattered rubbish – scraps of cardboard and hessian bags, bits of wood, large empty cans, a set of cast-iron tongs lying by the lip. And there were echoed voices from her home, and there was the blackness that stretched from the surrounds in long bars like teeth, encircling the morsel edging upwards in the mouth's middle, the woman, on her knees, terrified that they might throw her out here, where the men of the trees dwelled in the corners of the dark.

One of the handlers put his foot behind a big cardboard box. He dragged the box quickly (as if performing a side-foot soccer pass) so that it slid off the platform and onto the concrete. He repeated this action with a sack. These two packages each had only one sticker: a single orange circle.

The others were regarding the stranded woman mistrustfully, uncertain of what to do. She looked to the Son. She was petrified and just then, when the platform was halfway up, half a floor away from the people lying on their stomachs, peering down at them, waiting with their entreaties and their gifts, just then, the girl with the long curly hair and the backpack touched the Son's blanketed arm and said, “Let's go.”

Ashélene stepped quickly to the left. She picked up two bundles of logs, threw one to Buddy, gathered a box under her other arm and then she turned and ran and vaulted off the platform at its northern edge.

Fela looked over his big shoulder and watched, helpless, as Buddy Kelly followed her. And, for a single microsecond, his vision blurred in an adrenal flash as he considered giving chase, but he knew he wouldn't. She had known, too. And Fela watched as the blanket fell from the little girl, as she held her hands to her tiny chest and walked slowly to the edge.

“Stay there, Pin!” Buddy Kelly said, but his hands were already lowering the firewood to the ground, and the white blanket was already falling on top of it.

Pin was standing with the white toes of her saddle shoes over the edge of the lift. The gap was narrowing. Pin was now two-and-a-half metres above Buddy and climbing, and of course she was scared, but Pin was doubly brave, and she jumped with a little yelp, a little “Eep,” (the first sound she had made in many years), and landed in the young man's arms, as they both fell to the floor in a plume of dust, beside the plummeting shaft.

“Pin-head!” said Buddy Kelly to the gap-teeth smiling at him from below the short brim of the Gatsby hat.

The girl was sprawled across his torso. And then a blue blanket flopped down on top of the two. Buddy Kelly pulled it back from over his eyes and looked to the elevator's undercarriage. He then heard the loud suction, the drawn-out pull of Fela's most disgusted and deploring (and oddly affectionate): *'Tchuuk!'*

Buddy Kelly stood up. He was glad to be on solid ground, and it could conceivably have been a by-product of the relief he felt (at last away from all those impassioned stares), but for having escaped the droves with the help of Ashé, and having caught the tot (granted it wasn't the smoothest of landings), Buddy Kelly felt quite heroic.

Then little Pin pointed to the bag, stuck out her arms and he, understanding her perfectly, shortened the strap and slung it around her. But as he did this, his heart suddenly broke, because he realised she had no family, and he realised his own little sister was dead.

Buddy Kelly was that type of peculiar person who experienced those most prominent of emotions, to do with loss and achievement, those categorical emotions that define certain events such as death and success, both acutely and most deeply. This was not unusual in itself, but this manner of feeling was exasperated by the build of his sunken mind, that operated behind the inane run of thoughts as a deceiving and masterful procrastinator. For it absorbed the facts and framed around them a guise of indifference, all the while secreting into her veins drop after drop of anaesthetising poison. For days and months his mind meted despondence out into his blood, drop after drop, keeping the true awful impact away, deferring it for a time like this, when he thought to stop and wonder, now, momentarily emancipated from the insidious disease, to stop and wonder why it was he should feel perpetually shamed.

It struck him at last and he reeled from the force, but now was not the time. And a tear escaped, but he swallowed the terrible misery to sit in him and digest and fester for painful regurgitation another day.

“Hard work being famous,” he said.

“Shhhhh,” Ashélene said urgently.

Buddy put his finger to his mouth sheepishly.

“Follow me. No sound,” she said.

She crept away. And here, in the owl-like way in which she stepped without a sound, she offered a tiny taste of her proficient, animalistic physicality.

The dark floor was mottled with torn-up refuse – as if eviscerated by hungry rats – and strange, geometric stretches of cold grey; the outside light broken on the crosses and the cage of pillars around the core.

Buddy Kelly took Pin's hand and they followed Ashélene as she crept forward, carefully navigating the scrappy minefield, to where she halted, taking cover with her back against a concrete column. She peered around it, then looked to Buddy Kelly, whom she smiled at sweetly, as if amused by the degree of his terror.

“They're sleeping. Give me one minute and then come,” she said.

She loped off towards the southern curtain wall.

Buddy Kelly waited and watched as her graceful figure shrank, as she paused by the corner mattress to listen. She then skirted around behind it, and began tampering with something affixed to the thick rufous columns.

Buddy straightened Pin's hat. He took her arm once more and they stalked slowly across the expanse.

Ashélene was beyond the bed. She had unlatched and slid upwards a large grate, which had been in place across a rectangular hole in the wall. Here, the four plates, fixed to the columns and spadrel crossbeams to fashion the crucifixes, were absent. She motioned for them to come.

They crept around the mattress and one of its many lumps moved and groaned. Buddy Kelly saw a host of blanketed figures, their protruding heads stroked with thick braids, sleeping on their backs. They had their arms stretched out, impossibly long and sinewy bare arms, each lashed with hundreds of thin, white scars like papercuts, so numerous that their skin appeared to be scaled. They had more of these cuts across their cheeks. Their long fingers were curled into tight fists.

Buddy Kelly, foolishly ensconced by the frightening scene, was possessed by an eerie foreboding. He imagined what he might do if a set of eyes were to open, and he stared at the sharp-nosed faces until he saw exactly that. Opening eyes, arms outstretched like statues cursing the gods.

A wave of dread rushed down his length – this is what he would have done – and tweaked each of his muscles into sharp contraction. He shuffled away rapidly, in the grips of this little paroxysm, brushing himself clean of imaginary spiders, pulling Pin away from the crowded bed. They moved to the breach in the building. They ducked under the grate, and Ashélene quietly lowered it behind them.

Ashélene loved little more than to be out here on a night like this, with the nimbused moon hanging full in the sky and the air breathless, to be perched here on one of the mountain's narrow ledges.

To Buddy and little Pin, the crag's haggard face must have seemed jagged and inhospitable, clearly insurmountable. Ashélene saw the terrain as a patchwork of varied obstacles, as a playground crammed with puzzles waiting to be conquered. Its voltaic outcrops and sandstone shelves were merely problems waiting, almost begging, to be overcome.

She saw the pelt of the grey old mesa as alive with routes, a network of concealed aisles that all linked up through its slabs and mossy boulders. These could take you almost anywhere. Each section presented a different challenge, be it one of speed or strength or strategy, and she loved nothing more than unleashing her dynamism upon it, especially on a night like this.

Perhaps she would not have described herself in this way, but Ashélene was known by her friends, by the band members and her two families, to be above all things energetic.

This is the word that came to their minds when she spoke and when she smiled her wide smile, when they met with her at some elaborate occasion she had orchestrated – an immaculately themed party or bring-a-thing dinner – or even when she divulged her immediate plans from day to day. Ashélene was always bustling with positive energy; somehow immune to the wailing of the world.

And out here in the night, she felt kindred to the creatures who came out like her to revel in the darkness; the crickets and the bats, the mice and shrews and the snakes that stalked them. And she would identify a project, a clump of boulders, or a seemingly unfordable stream, and she would bolt and scramble, find herself stranded, plot an escape, clamber and leap, alight upon a quiet reef on which to rest (but not for too long), listening to the nocturnal songs under the moonlight. The quiet was hers.

These ledges were the passageways of her secret world.

She knew that, from this side of the mighty escapement, there were only two ways to get to its summit – only two she dared consider tackling without rope.

The easier of the two was an ancient zigzagging trail, which snaked up the chasm in which Azania was wedged, which you could only get to if you followed the broken

highway past the building's doors to the other side. The other route was over the saddle that bridged with the soldier's peak to the east. And she had discovered two routes to the top of the latter peak, and various other trails to many bluffs and obscure lookouts. She had discovered strange, decaying relics from that defeated civilisation; canons, cableway stations.

She saw the worming shapes of many more avenues to be explored – perhaps even another way to the mountain top – which she might attempt one day, having more experience under her belt. And when she wandered and played here it was mostly at night. But Ashélene had never been out in Azania's precipitous backyard with anybody else.

She wondered where she might take them, what paths they might manage. But, of course, the answer was obvious. From the escapeway on the first refuge floor there really was only one way to go. The building blocked the way to the west, and climbing over it was not a possibility; those cliffs above Azania were sheer, with long sections of near flat rock. She had known the answer when she had stepped onto the lift. She would take him to the east, to the overhang by Goblin's mound. Luckily, it was not far at all.

This necessitated following a short stretch of the trail the tree-men used, which had been rendered compact and plantless from their daily journeying. This trail ran parallel to the east wall of the building, until leaving the gorge, where it bent sharply right to run along a narrow ridge, almost straight across the mountain's lower half, eventually over the saddle, to the crater wherein the grove was nestled.

Before they set off, she removed a can from the box. She mimed for Buddy Kelly to drop it into her backpack. She then stashed the cardboard container in the scrub beside the building's pillar wall (you never knew when these provisions might come in handy).

They three then began the short hike.

Ashélene walked in the lead, slower than she was used to, but at a respectable pace nonetheless. When she turned to gather tinder, Pin was just off her heels, traipsing deliberately with her short stride, trying to match Ashé's footsteps exactly (although making twice as many). And then she saw Buddy Kelly, his odd face with its boyish features, yet with the whole defined by strong cuts of shadow. His eyebrows were thick and dark, his cheeks hollow, and long dark lashes flicked out from his sagely eyes.

She saw him walking gaily with the wood bundled in his arms, with the blanket around his neck (so that its long tails hung behind him). She caught his eye and he turned to admire the surrounds, the black and grey wall hulking to his right, which had the texture of an old, burnt-out log.

“It’s beautiful,” said the young man after a way, when they were well clear of the building, but could still hear its assiduous vein.

Ashé paused for a second – Pin walking into her – to survey the vista tersely. Its brashly profound elements loomed in every direction, with its ruined city below. She was like an architect leading friends through the queer halls of her finest construction, her citadel.

It was magnificent, she knew it, she knew every piece of it. She was humbled by the immensity of the immortal mountain, by the stately hillocks on the top of soldier’s peak and at the lion’s head to the west. Still, she was awed by the waterfalls sculpting valleys through the fine bush, the crumbling buildings below like an elaborate frame for the vegetation bubbling up around them; the scooping, starlit bay. She led them on, looking out, so they might note her reverence for her kingdom. As if even the moon was a fantastic light she had set in front of the stars.

“Ashé, what are they?” Buddy Kelly said after a while.

This question had been repeating in his head ever since they had made their escape. That image of the long-armed, scaled bodies was still vivid in his mind, and the silence now safely broken, he let it go.

But just then Ashélene stopped again. There was something blocking the path, which could help in addressing the young heir’s inquiry. It was a sight that made her heart lurch with sadness. But she could appreciate that it was all part of nature’s great machinery, the give and take; that predators must have their prey. She pointed and they gathered around.

It was a little Dassie caught in a snare. Its leg, for all its struggling, was sawn to the bone below the tight loop of wire. It stood dead still. As Pin bent down to scratch between its little round ears, it dashed forward and thrashed itself around by the tethered leg, there the ripped muscle and bloodied bone chafing the unyielding coil.

“These small animals are like water,” Ashélene said, bending down and addressing Pin, touching her back (but hoping to teach Buddy something, too). “They always try to follow the easiest route. They are predictable. That’s how they get caught. And that’s how you catch them.”

“You’re wasting your breath,” said Buddy Kelly. “Pin’s never been caught. She knows all the tricks.”

He smiled at Ashélene. She had seen. She was glowing in his eyes. This woman from his dreams.

Pin reached out her hand and the Hyrax yanked on the wire. She held her arm outstretched for a spell, watching the creature fight. She withdrew it slowly and stood up.

“*They* work in the trees,” said Ashélene. “This silly guinea pig will be their lunch.”

She turned and continued down the path. Pin followed without looking back. The path was no more than a foot wide with large, sharp-edged boulders above and below, and the thick, wiry brush was like a massive, hirsute parasite bursting from every fissure.

“You're going to leave it?” Buddy said.

“As I said, for their lunch. They work in the trees. If it weren't for them the elevator wouldn't run and people wouldn't get fed. But I'll show you tomorrow. We're almost there.”

This was his dominion now, she thought. If this *was* indeed him. She thought it might be. She wouldn't mind. But if this soft-spoken young man was really Anazi's son, he had a lot to learn, and now was as good a time as any, and she an unparalleled authority.

They broke off from the deep-set contour trail, following Ashélene as she scrambled over the blotchy grey rocks. This point was important. It was the crux. Where they diverged now was the only scalable surface that would meander, through other very specific, short and traversable spreads, up to the cave where they would rest.

Occasionally, Ashélene set down her baggage, and reached down for the thin little girl. And Buddy Kelly set down the wood and lifted her up from around the waist. This was not one of the favourite things Pin wished to have done to her, but she wouldn't complain nor resist the rough hold of the clumsy hands (Buddy's bony fingers were the worst). Indeed, she went so far to help them in passing her between them like some inanimate lump in a dress, as to stiffen all her muscles, straighten up like a board, until both her feet had been placed on solid ground.

They went on, gradually climbing, bouldering up and then climbing laterally, again and again, away from the trail of the arboreal men.

The heir was doing well (despite his flat shoes). And by and by, they came to see the cave a short way away. It was like a deep coin-slot in the mountain's gnarled skin. This groove was just above a quaint hillock, a small knoll, which Ashélene had named for the devil's puny servant.

Pin, at this point sick of the pair's underestimation of her (was this not the girl who rode down the counterweight as if it were a carousel pony?), darted past the guide and up the rocks like a little mouse, so that by the time the other two arrived, she was sitting waiting, wrapped up in her blanket, her feet dangling over the lip of the lower shelf of that black gash in the berg.

Buddy Kelly assembled a small blockhouse of logs (not a bad effort, Ashélene thought) and she arranged the kindling she had collected about it. She lit the little fire and joined

the two sitting on the ledge, with the fire between Buddy and her (with Pin on Buddy's side).

Ashé wiggled out of her backpack. Her bell-curve bosom jiggled along with the slight bulge at her midriff (the tender evidence of one who indulges a love of fine food cooked in butter, of cheese and chocolate). She scoured inside the bag for her water-bottle and pen-knife. She passed the water to Pin before setting to work on the beans.

Buddy Kelly was playing with a tiny flower, purple with a yellow centre, which had been growing in a crack in the rock. He thought the thing strangely wild; its brightly coloured blossoms were serrate and numerous, like the tentacles of a sea anemone, and its habitat was that of a reclusive bird.

Sitting here, halfway up the mountain, partially roofed by the overhang, with the diminutive mound a short way below his feet – which prevented any otherwise inevitable effects of vertigo – he felt a strange serenity overtake him. The crickets were chirping and the air was fresh, and he could detect that wonderful saltiness, drifted across the necropolis from that dark pond.

“Where do you come from?” he asked, but it did not come out exactly as planned (it came out as if he were thinking aloud). “I mean, you seem so at home out here. Which world do you come from?”

“I'm the same as you,” she said, standing the open can delicately atop the maturing fire. “Actually, I don't know how much you're learned about all this,” (She talked unhurried, in a light, playful voice), “but, well, you could say I'm your opposite.”

He looked at her meaningfully in the frittering light. And it was her turn to glance away demurely, and there ... what was it those lips were saying? That pinch of a smile? The pin-pricks of white in those dark eyes? Were they hopeful? That brush of a smile. What did that face say? Was it somehow assured?

This is what Buddy Kelly thought: how old is this love?

Pin looked to Ashélene calmly. She looked back to Buddy Kelly, back to the other, contented. She too, bewitched by the timid moonshine.

Buddy picked another flower – the first he had dismembered, piece by piece, while his mind recited an old chant. He leaned over and laced it behind Pin's ear. He nudged her affectionately with his elbow – this unsheathed sky was new to the little girl. The enchanting quiet.

“What does that mean, Ashé?” he said sedately. “Tell me your story.”

She liked the way he said her name, how he pronounced the accent at its end; just how she had said it amidst all that chaos a few hours ago. She liked that he had remembered.

“Look out there. Beyond the bay. Can you see it? That range behind the long beach? Can you see? Look closely. The mountains. You see them, Pin? Can you see the light in the middle of those mountains? It's just a red spot. See how it dims and grows?”

Yes. It was true.

It was the same coastline that surrounded the dead city in its bowl, that, after being hashed with the piers of the old dock, curved slowly to the left and then extended for leagues. The white streak of the beach, the tiny waves, extended out almost due north, to where it vanished into the black horizon. To the east of that beach, far inland, was a long expanse of mountains and yes, right in the middle, near the range's zenith, was a pulsing point of red light. Buddy Kelly looked to his left, saw again a sliver of that ungodly mask, of Azania's grotesque face.

“That's where I was born,” Ashé said.

Ashélene gently clapped her half-covered palms around the can which sat on the fire. She drew it out of the smoke for Pin, signing out with her shoulder's how the young girl might to take. Pin cuddled her little hands in the blanket's tails. She took the beans. Ashélene then popped her pen-knife, now with the fork extension out, into the pot.

“That's my Azania,” she said.

Buddy Kelly rocked back, adjusting to this revelation. There was another monolith. Another elevator pumping blood, feeding a whole other people.

“I don't really know how to begin, I guess with --”

“Once upon a time?” said Buddy Kelly. “That's how you start a story, right, Pin?”

Pin was nodding lethargically, bemused. And the other had smiled, her cheeks drawn into two round bobbles below her eyes, her lips closed, in a way restrained, unlike her, but then this was not an easy tale to tell.

“There was a man ... once upon a time that is,” she said; again the gentle smile, “who lived at the very top of a tall tower that was stuck in a mountain. He was the ruler of that great city, and they called him Anazi. And he had a son. But he had lost his wife.”

She hesitated, kicked a booted foot out into the expanse, as if to cast off the building anxiety creeping into her voice. She stared outward through the void.

Buddy Kelly took the can from Pin, speared a bean but did not bring it to his mouth. He stirred the contents, hunched forward, looked sideways through the flames, to the girl.

“What happened to her?”

“The wife of this man, whom he had loved very much, died during childbirth,” she said, tenderly now, suddenly aware that this was almost impossible to understand, impossible to tell.

“You see, before this happened, this man, Anazi, was a good leader. He was benevolent but also generous and insightful. At that time, he was still in touch with his people, who sometimes called him 'Aunt Nancy'. He enforced the laws as one must in a world like his. When there is only so much to go around. He kept his secrets, those secrets that are the burden of a guardian to keep, the secrets that a leader must lock away to ensure his people's happiness. They couldn't know everything, but so great was his kindness that it hurt him to keep them in the dark. And he listened to his people and was good to them. He was never bitter that he had no heir.

“You know,” she said and laughed abruptly, “you know, when a leader loves his people so much that he actually gives a shit about them? It's hard to comprehend, I know, but imagine a ruler who cares more about his people than his legacy, more about them than retaining power. That was Anazi. He didn't mind, even though his father had ruled before him, but he didn't care if the bloodline was lost, as long as somebody with a brain and a good heart took over. And they worshipped him for it, this is what my father tells me. But when his wife became pregnant he was already old. And all the people heard about it and gave thanks.”

Buddy Kelly peered into the flames, saw the girl beyond. Her legs were flapping out every now and then, with the butte of the soldier's helmet behind her. How could one take this in? How could one remember his own birth? He thought of Winch, that ox of a man he was so unlike. He thought of Catherine, how she had so cherished Buddy. He did not think of Claire, not yet.

“The child was born healthy, and in the same year I was born, in that tower there, across the way. I was the third daughter to Julius, who lives there still, with my mother, at the very top. I played with you – or, that child. We spent our first few years playing together, there behind that red light and here in this building, too.

“But Anazi had become beset by grief. He had lost faith in his own world because, you have seen, it is humble world. His people had been brutalised by history and he had kept them safe, kept their bellies full and their heads full of hopeful songs. He had planned for that day when his people would be ready to leave Azania, when the world would be ready to have them back. When they would reclaim their land. He did not tell them what he was planning of course. For them, the tower was, it still is, all they know.”

She looked at Pin. The little girl was mirroring Ashélene; kicking her feet out into the night, entranced by the bard's young, womanly voice, by her sounds, if not by their meaning.

Buddy was ruminating the beans, gazing out over all the parts of the slowly drowning city, its buildings like neglected tombstones. He wouldn't have known but the ocean was now reclaiming its land in revenge. See how the giraffes bend to drink? And the foliage was rising, vengeful, too. Was this his inheritance? A flooding graveyard?

Ashélene bit her lip, continued.

“You see, to them the outside is cursed. It's that simple. Azania is a sanctuary because once, their descents from this city you see, became arrogant and sinful.”

“Sodom and Gomorrah.”

“Yes. Or the great flood. To them it is all the same. An ancient mythology. All they know is that God got pissed off and that crater, you see there, that clearing in front of the tall buildings? That's what God did to them for their betrayal. And people for many generations have been banished, such is the way, for being lazy or breaking the rules. If there was no punishment a God like this wouldn't work. His blessing wouldn't mean as much. So those who transgress are thrown out. Because it is dangerous out here. There are animals in the ruins.”

The docile flames lapped at the cool air, the logs gently crackling. The tin had made its way back to Ashélene. It was hard for Buddy Kelly to imagine that in the evening peace there was danger lurking.

“To the people, Anazi is God's mouthpiece. A prophet, sometimes equated with the supreme Lord. When his wife died, my father tells me, he missed her terribly. And then the child became sick – and we have no *real* hospital here. And the child was meek and when he became sick, Ananzi decreed that he should be sent away, to a place where he could learn and above all, where he could be protected. To return one day when he had been educated and come of age. And as a gesture of sympathy and understanding, my father sent me away too, so that the child might have companionship in Dalphiney, even if only spiritual, which is the way things turned out. It was a pledge of allegiance. You see, they had been good friends, him and Julius, and there was a time when some of their subjects even knew each other as neighbours --”

“And the child? He became lost?”

Ashélene glanced at him and he held her eyes. She saw then that property, the glittering in those two orbs, the strength it took to ingest all the whirling sorrow of a sick world and to hold it, there, in those deep reservoirs. She sat up in inadvertent reaction to his skulking gait, her feminine shoulders pulled back under her fine, curly hair.

“I've been waiting for that child to return. My father sent me away but, you see, I have two older sisters. When his son was taken away, Anazi started to lose his mind. He

begrudged his citizens for their vulnerability; because if they became sick they would die. He started to resent the artifice of this world. And his grief was inconsolable. And he became angry and began to despise my father, his children, our happiness. He seemed to forget that he had a son out there, far away from the sea,” she looked to him intently, “but we have been trying to find you.”

“The child. How did he become lost?”

“Well,” she raised a hand to point at the sharp corner of Azania which was poking out from the berg, “this was once a sanctuary, as I said, but now, even the insides have become contaminated. His retinue and ministers were easily corrupted, too easily infected with his malice. My father says they luxuriate in their power. This junta did not want the heir to return. At some point, they made sure he wouldn't. They destroyed the records of the surrogate family. And, as rumour has it, the Dalphiney family was more than happy to forget that the son was not really their own. But there are good people in the inside. Benny is one, who helped find you.”

She saw his eyes had narrowed. They looked ahead, contemplative but hardening.

“But, Buddy, the guards have become brutal. They toss people out on a whim. Ananzi mistreats the people of Azania. He allows fewer and fewer children to be born. He hates my father. It's a mess. Before, when the residents were banished for genuine reasons, the outcasts were few and quickly swallowed by the land. But now he throws out the old, the young, and there are militias growing. Bands of rebels. He will not accept a regent, and he has long since given up looking for you. And my father is ready to go to war.”

Buddy Kelly felt uneasy. But it wasn't the same dull worry from that chronic malaise he was so used to. That seemed to have shifted, altered slightly, suddenly lightened as if it might, after all, have been unwarranted – perhaps to be quietly excreted in the coming days. The guilt; something else had usurped it, something urgent, now ringing loud in his skull. He had received a letter. It said that he should come to Azania. Yet that act, actually coming to this forgotten place, had been so easy, almost as if he was pushed by a hand that was not his own.

“What makes you think it's me?” he said seriously.

“According to legend, this city was founded on a gold rush.”

“Your earrings?”

“Bloodstone. My father gave them as a gift to my family in Dalphiney. Anazi gave a gift, too.”

Buddy Kelly slowly pulled up the sleeve of his left arm. He looked at its reflective face, green jasper spattered in tiny pearls of iron oxide, the spilt blood of the Saviour. He looked at the Heliotrope enclaved in burnished gold.

“A watch,” said Ashélene.

He shoved out his arm. Pin regarded it curiously. Ashélene smiled at him, a volatility blazing in her eyes.

She said: “Then you have come at last.”

She saw him look away, dazed, and she bit her lip.

He was thinking a great many things. He thought: could this have been where Winch kept coming on his trips? How did it all add up? He wondered what this meant about the Kelly family (what was his real name?). Where was Winch? Could he somehow still be here, in the tower? The watch was not enough; he needed to meet Anazi. As he thought these things, his pupils snapped about, not seeing, but rearranging, refiling, engaged in frantic syllogism, thinking of all the things this could mean.

Ashélene lent him the silence.

Pin's avid attention, skimming between the one and the other, ears gathering all, gradually waned and she began to nod off. And the other two watched as her eyes closed and her chin fell to her dainty chest. Soon, they caught her germ of exhaustion.

Ashélene found an appropriate log to use as a torch. She crawled into the narrow depths of the cave to check for snakes and spiders (of which there were none; only shedded skin), and, after she had stoked the fire and made a mattress from the spare clothes between them, the three went to bed, their heads by the steppe. The moon was bright overhead, haloed in frozen crystals from the troposphere.

Buddy Kelly took his pill. He lay on one rounded shoulder, as was his way, but before oblivion claimed him, he turned onto his other side. He looked over the top of the Gatsby hat. He looked at the girl with the minute bulge under the tip of her nose, with the minutely chubby cheeks, which now pressed around her pursed lips. And her eyes opened, and for a while they looked at each other, confiding secrets, a thing pure and wordless, lying in the berth in the rockface, just like that.

The sun hadn't risen when his eyes slid open, with a knee pressing gently into his side, when he saw there, suspended above him, a cutely curious face.

"Halow?" it said, inquisitive, much like a toddler might, after a long-suffering spell inspecting a grandparent who was finally waking.

He grinned dreamily, leisurely, as one does to a lover before rolling over on a wintry Sunday. But then he felt the ache in his shoulder, his neck, at his hip from the hard bed, and now, as she increased the pressure, in his upturned flank.

"Buddy. You snore," she said, digging the knee forcefully into him. She shook him. "Get up. I want to show you something."

Unusually, he found that he did not want to sleep any longer – despite the callings of the dream that yet coddled him; with its antagonist now having a definitive form – and so he rolled out to the side. He tucked the blanket around the appendage-less little ball that was Pin.

He slipped on his shoes. The night had been short but his mind had been busy. It had endured an entire lifetime, enacting a long string of simulated events (along with some impulsive vagaries). It had screened the highlights of many years in compressed time. These experiences were now interpolated into the compendium of his memory. Hence, upon stretching out his stiff limbs, he felt that he and she were no longer strangers.

"Thanks for ending my dream by the way," he said quietly, wiping the sleep from the corners of his eyes. "It was terrible."

"Oh ja? Is that what you were mumbling about?" said Ashélene, sitting on the rock shelf and buckling her boots. "You talk and snore at the same time. It's amazing."

"What was I saying?"

"Just nonsense."

He felt slightly relieved. He was always weary of the content of these mummeries, especially under the spell of the sleepers. But only slightly today, for Buddy Kelly's updated memory had put him in an unassailably pleasant mood.

"Ja, it was weird," he said, brandishing an incorrigible grin. "I was a little Dassie. Being devoured by this vicious animal. A jackal. It was pretty violent. Lots of fluids".

Ashélene threw a pebble at him.

She stood up, spreading her hands out in front of her as if to hush him, to hush the audience for she was about to star in a little show.

After tosselling her hair, she launched into a kind of show-girl burlesque: she jerked her shoulders to the left, pivoting from her waist. Her right arm, which was stretched alluringly across her front, gently unhinged the sleeve of the other arm from its thumb. She then jerked to the right to unhook the other hand, all the while eyeing him seductively. This stop-motion routine continued as she swung her hips to the left, bending an arm behind her head and tilting her head back, then bouncing onto the right thigh (left foot pointed), the other arm raised. She thus began, to the rhythm of her comely hips shifting from side to side, dragging the black top up over her head.

“The sexiest jackal I've ever --” he tried to say, watching her little striptease indulgently, but he lost his breath, “let at my entrails.”

Ashélene chucked the jersey at him. Underneath, she wore a white blouse, which tied in a bow behind her slender neck, which was cut-off at her middle so that her navel was visible on the gentle curve of her belly. The shortness of this garment also exposed the faint vertical lines of her much employed obliques, and much of the soft flesh that curled down and inward, disappearing under her low jade jeans. She had a plump bust; a decidedly feminine, hourglass figure. And yet, visible in her arms and shoulders, were subtle, contoured signs of her strength. Buddy Kelly, done ogling, raised his eyebrows in resigned adulation.

“Devouring you, huh?” she said. “I'm sure you had it coming.”

“I'm sure I did. It was making a lot of noise.”

She giggled wickedly.

There were parts of her that were sparkling, even now in the meddling twilight: there were, of course, the earrings, and she wore a delicate silver necklace, and silver chain-link bracelets on her petite wrists, and there was the buckle of her crocodile-hide belt (with its knarly brown scales), and then, there were her eyes.

“Hey, snap out of it,” she said in a loud whisper “We have to hurry.”

“I'm ready, already,” Buddy Kelly said.

In response, she bounded off across the mountain, under the stars snuffing out systematically as the sky fused to blue, off and away along an indistinct track known only to her.

She clambered over the boulders and hoisted her trailing legs up gracefully, and Buddy Kelly tried his absolute best to keep up. He tried his utmost to keep that shallow furrow, which traced her spine, which tapered off just above the 'v' of her lower back, that pudgy

of her love-handles, creasing now as she stepped ... in short, to keep the multifold and magnetic sight of this beautiful creature as close to him as possible. And you must forgive him for his crude objectification, but Buddy Kelly was enraptured – we'll leave out a plucky description of the two turgid spheres he considered to be the main attraction.

They travelled diagonally now, up the rockheads, towards the saddle where the plateau of the flat mountain dipped and rose again to join the soldier's peak. It was hard going. The nature of the climb obliged the constant use of the upper body, but the young's man shoulders and back muscles were strong – for a lifetime spent supporting a heavy, downcast head.

And by and by they came to arrive at that narrow ridge, the watershed line, where Buddy Kelly, sweating, disrobed to his black undershirt.

From here, they could see the great house-choked flatland spreading for kilometres, with its stadia and warehouses and its weaving nexus of asphalt, to where a yellow cuticle of sun peeped out over the edge of the ocean far to the east. On this horizon, was an expansive mountain range.

The dense suburbs spread to the south and were bordered by the coastline to the east, and by the enormous backside of the mountain (on which they now stood) to the west. Azania's berg extended to where it intersected in a T-junction with another range.

The visible land was layered throughout with the myriad square abodes of countless abandoned townships, with the budding flora entangled, and here and there were deep, ringed depressions, all along the notched tail of a vast peninsular.

“This city was enormous,” said Buddy Kelly, astounded.

“It was,” she said as if she had forgotten, as if, while surveying the cubic bed, she was again reminded of its tremendous size.

They were crouched behind a boulder. Its grey skin was dappled with intricate doilies of lichen, which were milky-green and vermilion and white, and Ashélene pointed back towards the city core to the north.

“I like to think of this bulge, the CBD, as the whole thing's brain. You see how it bottlenecks there between the peak and the sea? All those highways are like the brainstem.”

She was pointing to the narrow passageway that bridged the round city bowl (with the concentration of highrises at the centre) with the sprawling suburban area they had just seen on the other side. The city was like the head of a light bulb; the passageway, like the stem.

In this channel there were few buildings. It was rather congested with numerous wide highways, avenues, bridges and roads, and the railway tracks which ran from the dock. These capillaries were all intermeshed, twisting around and under one another, fighting for room at that most important conduit. And each road branched through the capital, so that eventually there were narrow vessels touching almost every structure.

“Or the heart,” said Buddy Kelly, imaging the racket that the thousands of vehicles must have kicked up. A number of these old cars were rusting along the veins and arteries. It was spooky to hear the organism dead.

He looked to his left and saw the slim grey ribbon of the disintegrating contour road, on which he had arrived. It undulated lazily above the level of the urban sprawl, to the base of the building, to Azania, where a collection of life persisted. He tracked the road back as it curled around the peak. The patch of dirt, where the helicopter had landed, must have been behind the soldier's looming head.

“How did they do this?” he said. “Who would have --”

“Look,” she said excitedly, “there they are.”

Her gaze was directed to the south-east now. She was peering over the boulder, to a natural crater a short way below them, near the base of the soldier's peak. In this crater, was a small grove of about thirty long-trunked trees. Their foliage was bunched up in a canopy, like the Italian umbrella pines, so that each tree vaguely resembled a wide festival of balloons on long string.

But there was something extraordinary about them: the leaves were not green but silver, glinting wildly like mirrors. They were in fact not leaves at all, but thousands of rectangular photovoltaic cells. The plantation was mechanised.

Buddy Kelly watched as the long-armed people, with their scabby carapaces, climbed about the branches. They were naked but for the shredded trousers over their short legs, and swung around the boughs three to a tree, like orang-utans.

“They're replacing the faulty panels,” said Ashélene nonchalantly (although in truth this was a sight that still captivated her).

Buddy Kelly watched the braided apes toiling in the treetops, amidst the dense bursts of glittering silver and gold, which were like the aerial explosions of kamuro fireworks.

“They like to begin before it gets too hot,” she said.

“How long have people lived in the towers?” Buddy asked.

“No one really knows. Someone must, but not anyone around here. Many generations,” she said, regarding the furtive activity in those stilted mirrorballs.

“As far as I can tell, the tree men have been bred for many decades.”

“Artificial selection,” said Buddy.

“Yes. They say that they were once a family put in charge of the trees. And then others born with long arms were abandoned on the refuge floor, to widen the genepool. As you have seen, the other residents fear them.”

The sun was beginning its low arc across the sky, welcomed by the calls of clouds of birds.

Buddy Kelly felt at ease, despite the revelations of the previous night, despite everything else. He felt as if this girl beside him was his oldest friend. He felt a levity within him, an exuberance, perhaps owing to endorphins from the exercise, perhaps for just being caught in a simple moment, in the unprecedented divinity of a single, simple moment.

“You know, Ashé,” Buddy Kelly began, his elbows on the boulder, not quite knowing what he wanted to say, but sensing its essence, “there's some fucked up stuff going on out there, on this earth. You've seen it. And I sometimes think how difficult can it be? Honestly, I wonder, how difficult can it actually be for people to just get it together and all get along?”

“Because you know, everybody really just wants the same thing at the end of the day. Everybody just wants a little piece of happiness. And I get angry when I think of the greed, the unreasonable greed it takes to keep so many people miserable. But then, when I really think about it, my deepest, most terrible regret (and I guess it has to do with a thing like this), but my most profound anguish is not about the misery of the world. It has to do with a sort belief I have that we live in the dark ages. Like we're somewhere on the timeline between one thin stroke and the next one. And I come to think that this democracy thing is a sham. Like, isn't money, isn't credit just a representation of energy? Doesn't it represent one's ability to burn things? If I go walking and lose my way, have I not just taken away the potential of someone else? Have I not just spilled a drop from the last vial of fresh water?”

“I want to know what the world will be like in a hundred years, because if it's still here, people will still be spread all over it. And then, if you look how far we've come, not how much we've progressed, but how much it all has changed, in our short history. Imagine a thousand years from now. Ten thousand years! When they look back and laugh at the simple way we lived. How, you know, we propelled ourselves around at high-speeds in these crude vehicles that, imagine this, people actually *drove* unaided. How we feed off one other, how people suffer and, you know, they'll laugh at how we had to die. And in ten thousand years mankind will be here. People. Imagine the wars. The peace. A hundred thousand years. And I want to see it. I want to see if we get it together.”

Ashélene was looking at Buddy Kelly. She was biting her bottom lip, with her chin on her hands, trying to hide her delight.

“What?” he said, thinking perhaps he had sounded a fool. “Don't look at me like that.”

“So that's your story Buddy Kelly. A Lament for a future age.”

“My story's pretty ordinary,” said he, smiling coyly, “but, I don't know, I get the feeling it's really just beginning for me.”

He exposed it now. He bundled it in that look from under his brow: a timorous and bottomless hope.

“If you think I plan on falling in love with you, Buddy Kelly, don't even think about it,” she said and then glanced away. She shrugged, “If it happens, it happens.”

Buddy Kelly was suddenly flustered. Was that what he was thinking?

“That's not what I was thinking. I was actually --”

“That I'd have sex with you?” she said with mock-offence.

“That's a cheap way of putting it,” he said, grinning stupidly now. “But it feels like--”

“Yes it does.”

“What?”

“Fate,” she said. “Like when we finish each others ... ” she waited, twirling her wrist.

“Kidney beans?” said Buddy Kelly.

She feigned rage, trying to punch him, but was giggling. She then seemed to remember something, and began inspecting the ground, picking up stones.

“Okay,” she said energetically, handing a roundish stone to Buddy, “you see that big white rock? I'll give you three shots.”

That Buddy Kelly might generally be considered quite the near opposite of the model sportsman, being brittle and wan as he was, did not deter him from the challenge. He had a strong throwing-up and good aim. These skills had been honed during countless hours spent hurling rocks at mynahs and pylons, along that scratchy strip of veld on the other side of the home in which he had grown up. Still, he faked ineptitude now – as any seasoned hustler will tell you is the best way to approach these sorts of dares.

“That far white one?”

She nodded.

He turned, leaning away, and then thrust forward, hurling the stone out into the expanse. It was on target but not hard enough.

“Just adjusting for the breeze,” he said.

The next shot landed its target with a satisfying click. Her eyebrows popped up, impressed.

“So I guess that means you've got two,” he said.

She hunched around the projectile like a baseball pitcher. She unravelled in a whirl and slung the stone out expertly, but just missed. This did not matter however, for it was close on the most ambrosial display Buddy Kelly had ever seen.

“You're right, there's a bit of a breeze,” she said, licking her finger and holding it aloft.

The second throw connected. He nodded in diffidence.

“Seems I've met my match,” she said.

They stood in silence for a time, each mind with their thoughts, the disquiet of a life's serious things elbowing in from the fringe. She was gazing out over the land to the north, at its shapes gradually saturated with colour. He looked to the south, to the twinkling ocean, narrow-eyed and dauntless. So close to the fulfilment of a perfect dream.

“How would you know if it happened?” he said.

“I think you just do, you know?”

“I do,” he said. “Well, you let me know.”

She turned to him, mischievous, said teasingly, “Oh, I just might.”

Just then there was a loud double report, a gunshot and its eager echo, which shattered the serenity. It had come from the perished city's heart. Her eyes widened in worry. They waited for a response.

Nothing.

“We must go,” she said.

Buddy Kelly took one last look at the corrupted grove, and they joined the trail of the tree men and started out on the return journey.

They walked back through the accomplished dawn, along the side of the flat mountain. The wind was beginning to stir. The fleecy clouds that lay on the crag began to cascade in rivulets down its face, joining with the waterfalls, like ballast water down the side of a ship.

They walked briskly, but did not rush. Another plate of fog was floating in from the ocean, skimming across the water to envelop the docks and the sectioned hooves of the steel giraffes, but the ascending sun was unobstructed. Ashélene was pointing out the life all around them: the sunbirds and red-winged starlings and snake-tongued sugarbirds, the proteas and erricas of the needle-leaved headland.

She told him of a huge murder of crows that had once been circling above her – “At least 90 strong,” – and how she had thought they would tear her apart, how she had never been so terrified. She told him of the small oval tortoises she often came across, with their camouflage-green fragments, which looked like American hand-grenades from the

Second World War (“Could that be evolution? Imagine Venus-man-traps with big-macs for bait,” Buddy conjectured aloud).

She told him of the king cobras she had accidentally startled. She told him of the rock kestrel she had named 'Rocky', who seemed to always be sailing in the breeze above her, following her about (but who was probably still roosting now).

She pointed out the umpteen light-grey boulders that were spread throughout the shrubland like coarse salt, which, when noticed, were suddenly extraordinary. It was as if the land and its greenery was merely a field for them, as if they had been planted in rows and cultivated. She explained that they had all broken off and tumbled down from the mountain – though she had never seen one fall. And as they walked grasshoppers sprang to life in front of them like mousetraps, like spring-loaded confetti billowing across the path.

When they passed the Goblin's mound, they were surprised to find Pin missing, but heard a soft, ticklish whistle, and were relieved to see that there she was, moseying down the path behind them.

“We can't stay outside and enter higher up?” Buddy Kelly asked as they approached the tower. “Skip the elevator ride?”

Ashélene glanced back to the sun. It was still behind the peak.

“No. We could go around and up to the entrance at the other refuge floor. It's a good day's hike but no, there is more here I think you need to see.”

31. Bloodhound In The Mornings

One-hundred-and-thirty-seven. One-hundred-and-thirty-six. These fucking numbers, forever sounding off. Counting down to nothing.

She called him *Papillon* because of his big ears.

The guard was away from the gate but why bother? One-hundred-and-twenty-nine.

What was it he had said? Something that had her smiling almost right away.

He said something like, “Vet, huh?” because he was trying to be smooth or maybe it came out like, “So Mac tells me you're a vet.”

He might have said all that, all those empty words in rapid succession, dropped the name, because he was bowled over and trying to be smooth. Those first words he said, their order, their meaning, they were not important at all.

He just wanted to hear her speak. He wanted to see that softness ... what was it he saw? That tenderness right there, that projection he was so drawn to he almost fell into the flat, leaning on the doorframe like some smooth operator, his jacket slung on a finger by his shoulder, nearly pulling him right in, the product of each tiny cell and pore, every fibre in every sinew adjusting underneath, there in her face, and the puddled eyes and the glossy lips; that softness externalised. Was that what it was? Was it a kindness? He had wanted so badly to know. He had wanted to hear what that softness sounded like.

Bad bead. He could almost see through it. He could almost see that it was a reject before he flipped it over. Into oblivion you go. One-hundred-and-seven.

But that's not what tickled her.

She affirmed. Ja, it's true. “Vet in training,” it might have been. Or maybe she nodded.

He said: “So is it true *all* dogs go to heaven?” Just like that.

Leaning on the doorframe. He remembered that. And she had smiled. What was it? She was constantly mourning, sad when she smiled, as if she was guarding some atrocious secret, some abysmal information about the truth of every single thing. She was sad when she was happy, like she might reveal at any moment that it was all a trick, that she was a spirit who had to pack up and leave for a lonely ever after, like she were just drafted to the frontlines of some hopeless war. Like she was an oracle, and it was true, yes, she could confirm, we were all going to burn in hell.

“Some do,” she said after that censored smile, “some are reincarnated.”

“As cats?”

“Depends,” she gave a shrug there, enticed maybe, hesitantly flirting. “Depends on how they lived their lives.”

“So you're telling me I might have been a dog?”

“Maybe,” she said, tantalising, wanting to give it up. “A very bad one.”

Wanting to give it up. Just a twinkle.

So they had this running joke. After making love he would get a grade according to his performance. Doberman. Whippet. Great Dane. Bullmastif. And when she sulked she was a Pug. A Poodle doing her hair. Pomeranian. Corgi. Husky in the mornings. Bloodhound in the mornings.

“Chow, see you later.”

Sit. Stay. Roll over. Beg.

Seventy-five. Bad bead. Sixty-four.

Play dead. Malamute.

Mac's girl was going to the dance.

“Her friend Claire, doing veterinary science, her date just pulled out. She asked if I knew anyone that wasn't a schmuck and available. Said I knew someone who was one of those things. What you think?”

So every giggle was deeply personal. It took a lot to get through that forlorn glazing, but when he managed it, when he achieved it, and the sadness cowered for a moment, every genuine laugh felt like a pledge of eternal love. She was surprised that she could laugh. Surprised by the sound she made when it happened. That breathless laughing was more personal than making love. She laughed when she brushed back his hair and saw his sticking out ears, his springy hair, which he kept long for just that reason.

So what was it? These fucking beads. It was a gentleness. She had a good heart. He wanted to possess that softness. He wanted it to enfold only him. And that is what he could never have. Although she had tried.

And they were walking in the park and saw some lady with three Beagles, three stupid animals tethered to her wrist; he looked at the dogs and hated them. Didn't want to name them. She didn't either. They had entangled the entire species into their relationship, his courtship. Wolves and fucking Dingos, too.

It was something he could never own. She was just fucked up and miserable. Obsessed with her secret. He wanted her without it but he only loved her for it. He wanted to wash her clean so he could corrupt her again. Corrupt her so that she could love only him.

It was her essence. It was why her smile was sad, her laugh sad. It was her beauty and her kindness. It was why she got smashed on energy drinks and vodka when they went out

dancing. Why she took the pills. Why she craved self-destruction. The reason she was just the way she was. And he really loved her. But she was inseparable from that twisted tumour.

The problem is, with every pledge of eternal love, what you really mean is, “I will love you forever right now.”

Just for now, I love you forever.

So he tried to cure her. And when they got engaged, it felt like he had succeeded. But it was just a remission. She said he was smothering her, but she knew that this was an unreasonable thing to suggest.

She wanted to remain the sad recluse, confined to her head. He wanted her empty. He tried to excavate her, find and extricate ... what? What was it? That tenderness. He tried to remove nothing short of her soul. Because with her it was intrinsic. The sadness. Without the sadness she had no idea who she was, who she might have been. The sadness for a love that could never be, and she was sad that she was an abomination.

He missed the pink secret-socks she slept in. And he had a theory about those glossy lips. You see, she was crying constantly; a sort of whimpering. She was covertly snivelling all the time. Quietly crying even when she smiled. And all those tears, she sniffed back into her mouth and, from there, they were plastered onto her lips. And her eyelashes; that's why they were so long. All those unshed tears and their nutrients. That's why she hated being touched in the shower, the bath, why she hated affection in the rain – because she was saturated.

And her dark-side when on the drugs. She was frightening. Sexy beyond anything he could have imagined. A Sheltie. If dogs can be sexy. (“You're attracted to sheep dogs?”) Lascivious. Rabid under the strobes, her mouth teasingly parted, seductive. Practically fucking on the dance-floor. And then the next day sweet and polite. Chihuahua.

These fucking eternal beads. God's infinite haemorrhoid scat.

“So tell me, do *all* dogs go to heaven?” that's what he said. Like that. And he loved her so much he made her hate dogs. All of them.

“You must have been a bad dog, Papillon, in your former life.”

Twelve. Eleven.

Those secret socks. Her toes. Cocker Spaniel eyes. What is it that he had said? “Work with animals, huh?” He had seen it already; he was already on the hook.

This hell was as good as any. This hell. These beads. Might as well be here with her gone. A hell perfectly designed. With a measly, snipped glance of the sun every now and then, five seconds, the sun shining through a keyhole, a smidgeon of warmth, more time,

another peek through a smaller keyhole. Reminding you it was there and you could not bask under it. Crumbs of sun through an entire day. Two. Hell's perfect racket. One. Never ending whispers. And it was all his fault. And if there was any resemblance between them it was in those misty eyes.

He had been there when she was designed, and he had made her broken. Made her like him. He made her with missing organs. Broken and sad and no one more precious. Buddy Kelly. That's the fucker. That's him. That's him on the lift, else this was the non sequitur. He should have looked today! *Today*. He came.

The dagger in his hand and the surge, never more ready to kill than today. *Buddy! Wait!* His thoughts and tongue perfectly synchronised.

The clock stopped.

From the briskness of morning they crept.

Buddy Kelly's gait was, like the sky he was sad to be leaving, embellished with a freshness, a rejuvenated perspicacity, a welling of purpose he was eager to pursue. They crouched under the grate, back into the tower and its shadow.

The strange troop was nowhere to be seen. There was scarcely a sign that this place was their nightly den, but for the blankets strewn carelessly about the huge mattresses as if by messy children, jumbled like the rubbish everywhere across the bland concrete floor, as if from upheaval by unscrupulous police.

As the three returned, they were immediately struck by the viscosity of Azania's atmosphere. They found themselves once more enfolded in its unique nebula of voices, with its metallic undertone of industry, its shredded light.

They headed straight for the hoistway. Ashélene conducted them forward with some urgency, like a tour-guide herding stragglers to the doors of a punctual bus. Her timing was impeccable, for it was only a matter of minutes – before they had even made it to the lip – that the elevator reared from the plummet.

The platform brought with it the enticing, leafy smell of the day's culinary concoction. Just then, Buddy Kelly decried an unmistakably familiar face. It was sitting above the solitary plastic chair at the platform's middle, marooned in a low wall of stacked cargo. It was his old friend, as big as life, who brandished, as always, his trademark sunglasses.

Chester stood up as the trio stepped proficiently onto the platform.

“The great Buddy Kelly,” he said boisterously, open-armed, for a second almost losing his balance. “My, my. You've been busy. Already settled down and made yourself a family.”

In a flash Pin had scurried over the boxes of beans and bags of rice and samp, the firewood and lengths of raw timber, between the legs of the straining workers, to where she stopped, standing right in front of the frumpy outlander, to extend to him her glowering introductory treatment. He put his portly hands on his knees, bending down to embrace her serious scrutiny. He beamed back his own welcoming brand of disinterest.

“What is *this*? You've birthed a weasel,” he said.

Pin, her eyes slanting crossly, reached out for his shades with her earthworm fingers.

“Uh, no,” he said, tottering backwards. “You seem to have more than your fair share of accessories.” He flicked her solidly in the middle of the forehead. “Scram!”

“Chester, I never thought I'd see you here,” said Buddy Kelly, feeling strangely nostalgic for having seen the goon, this anchor from his other life. He was overcome with an urge to slap him on his broad back (which he resisted, mainly owing to the clutter). “But here you are. So now you can tell me this isn't a dream.”

Pin had bolted back to Ashélene, rubbing the mark on her head. The older woman placed a gentle hand on the girl's shoulder.

“A dream?” Chester said ponderously. “It might be. But if it is, as far as I can see, it is not yours but mine.” He fingered the dimples around the cleft of his chin. “You dream what you see. You see what you wish,” Chester continued. “Here's what I do: bite the nearest teat, you can normally tell by what comes out. Or better, come here and smell my breath, then you'll know you're at the coalface.”

Ashélene's complexion was, by this point, addled with disgust.

Chester was enjoying his little holiday. Enjoying, with much relish, the act of looking forward to his arrival at Queenie's clutch. He was looking forward to the enjoyment he always found there, practically dripping with anticipation, and amidst all this contentment he was now feeling proud too, for his most recent oratory. He felt the note of his cynical philosophising to be right on pitch.

Buddy Kelly had yet to behold this version of Chester, unmasked of his civil skin as he was now, to behold the running clown-makeup etched intractably underneath.

“Anyway, I hope it's not a dream for your sake, Buddy,” the big man said, extending his paw to Ashélene, his card wedged cheaply between two fingers – and you could see, despite the shades, he was working her over with his eyes. “Chester, Miss. What an absolute pleasure.”

“You're the one who found him?” she said, taking the card politely and shaking his hand. “I wanted to thank you for that. Ashélene.”

“I am. The one and only. It's not a problem. It's my business. I like to stay in the know. But I should really be thanking you,” he said, turning to address Buddy, “and by that look on your face I would think you should be thanking her. So I guess we're square; a regular love triangle.”

Chester's sandbag bulk filled a loud, blue Aloha shirt snugly. The shirt's bottom hem barely extended over his belly. This was his vacation look. It was, in fact, the first time he'd found the horrendous shirt in years, but he thought the whole ensemble, with the Wayfarers, the slacks, suited the occasion particularly well.

“You don't work for the UP,” said Buddy Kelly.

Chester noted with disaffection how the mousy boy had seemingly transformed. Was this the fragile and dishevelled thing he had dragged up to the buffet? Commanding a presence, handsome now, forthright, with his aspect shed of its sulk?

“No. No I don't. You got me. But I don't work against them either.” He tapped the pin affixed to the shirt's sharp collar. “If it weren't for them, none of us would be here, none of this would be here. So they've got my vote.”

“You saw my watch,” Buddy said, before he became distracted, feeling a need to glue the pieces of the puzzle into place.

Chester gave a nod. “And I'm here to claim my reward. A good part of it anyway,” he said, his voice barbed with pomposity.

“What's the tattoo?” Ashélene asked.

“Don't ask,” said Buddy Kelly.

Chester offered a naive shrug.

They had reached another floor, blue-blue-red, and the team behind the counter was dolloping huge spoonfuls of racing-green slush, which was spread with veins of white like dark marble, into the waiting trays. The meal looked to be spinach in a sauce, with scatterings of roasted peanuts.

It wasn't Buhle managing the kitchen, nor was Fela one of the many peopling the lift. The focused denizens all seemed unfamiliar. They were getting on with business with an unassuming grace, every now and then shooting prying glances to the motley assortment of travellers crowded in their workspace.

For them, there was nothing much unusual about the day. They had heard the talk. They had spoken to neighbours who claimed to be eye-witnesses, who had confirmed the rumours that he was indeed back. And, some of these individuals, sharing his company on the lift now, had even seen him during the preceding day. Some had given him gifts.

Azania's raucous spirit prevailed in the air, punctuated by the vocalisations of milestones being reached in many lives. This was not unexpected. Nor was it unusual for them that the collective was muted (compared to the hysteria of the night before). For the wind was brewing (and would become a thrashing onslaught by nightfall), and star-shaped rays of light were pouring in through the holes in the curtain walls, which meant that production was in full swing, that Azania's machines were in operation, growling roughly as they always had. For them, it was not unusual that they should be expected to work.

“Why didn't you tell me about this place? I assume you have been here before?” said Buddy Kelly to the big man who had reclaimed the plastic chair, frumped into the throne.

“I have been here once or twice,” Chester was saying, fishing in the tog-bag beside the chair. “Some things aren't meant to be talked about. Not where we were, anyway, in the belly of the beast. Some things have to be seen. I doubt you would have believed me anyhow. I mean, seriously.” He raised his arms, presented the particles and the air. “So tell me, what do they want with sweetest Buddy Kelly anyway? To run experiments? Extract the gene that codes his tameability?” He lit the cigarette.

“It's complicated. When you say the beast, you mean Dalphiney?”

“No, I mean the free world. Dalphiney is the belly, not the beast. Which reminds me,” he said, standing up, making his way clumsily to the simmering pots on the counter, wiggling his fingers like a sorcerer.

They passed floor after floor. The long banquet benches were now manned to capacity. There was a comprehensive sense of absorption about the workers, in the way they were applied to their tasks. They hunched forward, transfixed by the small area marked out by their fussing, tooled hands.

These hands were chiselling and prising and sanding; turning the chunky off-cuts of hardwood into those pencil-thin rods, all the while emitting a hushed intensity, giving the impression that they were little more than robot-arms on a vast assembly line.

There were figures patrolling through the rows. These monitors were checking that each appendage was wholeheartedly engaged, that each had an adequate supply of raw materials. And there were others gathering up the finished bits, scooping them off the benches into large boxes, and others dallying with brooms, and there, a child, hanging linen by the hearth.

And, among the lattice pillars, between the fires, was a row of five buzzing band-saws, with their operators standing behind, whose feet were covered in dunes of sawdust, with great asbestiform sculptures of sawdust growing out of their shoulders; fibrous smokestacks vacillating in the beams of sunlight.

This seamless collaboration, or the individual parts of it at least, hardly seemed to notice the handlers leaving the lift, laden with supplies, who melded into their noise and sun-stamped number. They hardly seemed to notice Buddy Kelly at all. And he felt he should be glad about this, although he was aware of a tiny bubble of disappointment floating through his insides.

He caught sight of the jackal, the princess, majestic and splendidly ordinary all at once, and he supposed he was glad, after all. For he presumed he had found in her (not actively,

but in some deep place) a far more healthy, more enchanting applicant to tend to his fledgling ego. He addressed her now.

He said: "What do they produce?"

"They're paying their subscription fee. To God," spouted Chester over his shoulder, half-mumbling for the fag at his lips. Before pouncing on Buddy's question though, he had been searching for something to dip into one of the pots. He considered a finger. "If you don't make your payments you get your service discontinued. You get cut off," he said.

Ashélene scowled at the big man's back, with a palpable malice flashing in her dark eyes. In this she was unlike Buddy Kelly – she did not like him, almost immediately.

"He's more or less right," she said, "for these people it is a sacrament. These pieces they make come together in an offering of which they do not know the form, not here at least. For them it is a tribute and penance. Their labours appease God and thus, Ananzi, too. The things they make are offerings of thanks. Entreaties for good health. Here they're working with Red Oak. You see how long the rods are? They're making the arms."

"A visible sign of an invisible reality," chimed in the ostentatious Clown, having succeeded in persuading one of the cooks to lend him her ladle, and now rubbing the floral tapa of his frontal tankard, with the cigarette back between his lips. "A real sign of insanity, if you ask me."

"They believe in hard work," she said with a smile (which seemed to signal she had just risen above the dyed-in-the-wool defeatism of Buddy's associate). "These people believe that joy can be found in simplicity."

Buddy Kelly rotated his long neck – so that it was twisted like the elastic-band at the propeller of a toy-plane – to seek out Pin.

The little girl was sitting on a mound of sacks behind him. She was pivoting her head from side to side thoughtfully, as if humming a tune, while tracing a finger over the cross-hatching hessian. She rubbed at the faint sting in her forehead with the other hand. When she saw him, she quickly lowered the nursing hand. She gave him a gentle little smile and pointed enthusiastically to the bogie running up the pillar closest to her. Buddy Kelly smiled, nodding: yes! Amazing! I know.

And Buddy Kelly came to observe, with rekindled interest, the strangely ascetic ongoingings on the crowded floors they were passing by.

He noticed that after a few storeys, the wooden objects that the collectors were scraping into the large boxes had changed shape. There were still the four stonework fireplaces (perpetually enkindled despite the neutered morning light), with their flues intermazed

with the other pipes. Near the south wall were the doomed stacks of lumber-board, awaiting the five band-saws whose craning necks were like stand-mixers from a kitchen – awaiting the slim blades which were blurred in spasm, their screams inciting sandstorms. And there were the ablution blocks and expansive beds in the corners, the foolhardy sweepers bagging the mess, and to the casual observer, as he had been just a few moments before, it might have seemed that the work underway was standardised, that they were all producing the same short, purposeless dowel-sticks. But now the shape of the output had changed.

This batch looked like stout little truncheons (much like, although he would have resented the comparison, Earls' stumpy arms). They were round at the one end and thin at the other. The wood was of the same deep auburn.

“The legs?” said Buddy Kelly, turning to Ashélene, who appeared, likewise, in busy contemplation of the monkish multitudes at their craft.

She nodded.

After this series of floors, the shape changed again: the hands were now turning out long, flat ovals, like squashed hot-dog rolls; like tiny loaves of naan bread.

And these pieces sparked a dim sense of recognition in Buddy's mind, a synaptic jot of a fractured memory, deeply buried, that had no reference of place or person, no content at all, but for the feeling of intimacy evoked. It was the parts themselves, their morphology, that he knew. Buddy was then overcome by an impulse to feel them again, driven by a need to exhume this piece of his past. He began making his way across the lift towards Pin, who was chaperoning his bag. Ashélene regarded him curiously.

But suddenly he gasped and lurched backwards. He thought: Chester was wrong, surely it must be a dream. For four walls of wire had materialised where before there had been only air. A cage had been thrust around them.

Suddenly, they were trapped. They were cooped up like battery chickens. A chain-link fence of thick steel, which stretched to the roof, which was fastened between the four corner pillars, had impounded them like cage-fighters.

Pin let her hand flap against the rigid bars, like the arrow on a gameshow prize-wheel. She seemed to say in a simper, “You didn't know they have this in my world?”

Buddy Kelly glanced back to Ashélene. He was suffering from claustrophobia due to the abrupt confinement. And he had the realisation, borne on a wave of blood crashing against his skull, that he was now deep within the tower's guts. There was no quick way out, no emergency exit. She was watching him tenderly, sympathetically. Her face was a quilt of bright diamonds.

“We're passing the secure floors. Nothing to worry about,” she said and chuckled quietly. This well-meaning amusement had something to do with his surprised expression – but he did not mind; the sound was soothing.

Buddy gazed through the mesh. He was expectant of tattooed meatloafs, with shives between their gold-capped teeth. What he saw were full benches, their ranks and files quiet. The cenobites were entranced. Marking the surfaces in front of each, were small pyramids of red beads or seeds, numberless and tiny, like a divided desert of BB bullets. There were however no power-tools, no cuts of wood.

Ashélene began an explanation: “Most of them come from the outside --”

“It's prison. Don't sugarcoat it,” said Chester, smoke trailing out of his nostrils. “The slammer. These are the bad men that Dalphiney doesn't want to deal with.”

They had, by this time, already reached the next floor, and Buddy Kelly noticed the five pole-framed slots in the barricade in front of the kitchen counter. There was also an open frame with a door-bolt appendaged to one of its horizontal beams. This doorway, about a metre wide, was in the middle of the west section. The gate was swung fully open, out to the floor.

“It's not a prison,” Ashélene was saying, visibly flustered despite her resolution. “They are residents like everybody else. It's just for extra protection.”

“Because they're all blind?” said Chester with much animation, wagging a hand at her – the digits all touching, forming a spear-head. “Because they might stumble into the bottomless pit? They're *Inmates*. But you're right when you say they are like everybody else.”

Whatever they were, they exhibited that same churchly diligence as they got on with their drudgery, and the same hotchpotch fashion sense. They were dressed in summer clothes, winter clothes, in all colours of the rainbow.

Trays were presented and filled with slop. A few lackadaisical faces turned, regarding Buddy, then turned back in the direction their humped spines were indicating.

“They're from the city?” Buddy Kelly asked the girl.

“Mostly,” she said, struggling to quell her irritation. “They're from various places.”

“The funny thing is,” said Chester with a kind of perverse delight, “there's nowhere to run. They hardly know who the guards are. And the guards hardly know either. But there's no where to run.”

Buddy thought: if Winch was in this tower, this is where he could be.

The lift docked with another floor.

There was a tall, athletic woman waiting to come aboard. She had a pouch slung across her lean-muscle trunk, and she expertly pushed an old shopping trolley ahead of her onto the platform, raising the wheels over the gap as if she'd done it a million times before. Pin shot up and over to peer into the cart's nest.

"Hello, darling," the woman said, stroking Pin's cheek. "I love your new hat. Just give me a minute to fill it up."

Buddy Kelly was watching this woman cautiously. He was frozen, like a burglar hiding behind the opening front-door. He watched as she manoeuvred her cart out of the passageway (so the distributors might disembark). She searched through the boxes and soon found the appropriate ones. She began spilling the vacuum-packed contents into the trolley. But then she saw the young man, noticing the sprinkling of stubble on his pointy chin and above his plump lips, the centres of his thick eyebrows pulled down quizzically.

"Welcome back," she said, and there was an aura of confidence about her (perhaps this is why she stuck out, or it could have been the trolley, or merely her attractiveness).

"Here," Florence said, chucking him a packet, giving one to Pin. "I think it's apricot."

"Thanks," said Buddy, slightly nonplussed, holding up the package. "Ja. That's apricot, looks like."

"Oh, wait," she said.

She unzipped the navy pouch, stuck in a hand and riffled through its clattering bric-a-brac.

"I was hoping I would bump into you. I wanted to give you this. Nothing much. A small gift from me."

She leaned over and placed a ring in his palm. It was gleaming, a plain silver band, made for a broad finger, and there was an inscription on the inside.

Buddy Kelly clasped it delicately with the tips of his fingers. He brought it up to his nose. He spun it around, following the slanting font etched all along its inner rim.

It read: *My Love Eternal, Claire.*

Claire. His sister.

And it was after this moment, this terrible moment, when his conscious mind had its back turned, when it was trampled by a viscous, iron-clad cavalry, lacerated by

remembrance, grief, dense hooves of terror, routed in panic. After the unconscious had turned its spears inward, issuing self-inflicted wounds, after he heard shouts of his name and saw Azania's malevolent gob screaming, screaming sororicide, and there was no where to run from the disorder, the collateral damage, from the terrible charge of this moment.

It was after this moment, after he was reduced to the outline of a man, to a shadow, a mass of desolate gelatine, a ghostly incarnation of that decrepit frown from the labyrinth of mirrors, it was just after this, when, in everything around him, everything external, the rate of time abruptly doubled. The scene and its cast were in motion blur, everything was, but for Buddy Kelly, immured behind his visor. For Buddy Kelly, time had slowed.

He heard then his own name, in a wretched, enduring call. The voice told him to wait. He saw, in the illusionary waves rippling through his vision, in the hot-wax colours, he saw a man in a grey t-shirt, who had a mane of springy hair. He was sprinting towards the lift, running a relay with a silver baton in his hand, his lips mouthing Buddy's name. "Wait," he was saying. "Wait, Buddy," desperation in his eyes.

The platform was only half-a-metre above the floor and this man bottled all his weight into his lower body, crouching mid-stride, and then he sprang, launched by a superhuman combustion in his limbs. He was a long-jumper, flying through the jellied air, swivelling his torso, winding up, turning the tool back from the shoulder so he would fit through the gap.

Buddy Kelly watched this all as if it were a replay, and even though he somehow knew what was about to happen, his mind was cheering the contender on – you're almost through Philip – but then the woman had gripped the handlebars and thrust the trolley straight at him.

Sims connected; a head-on collision, his chest striking its front, his face whiplashing over the rim, his hair flogging over the rim.

He collapsed backwards. Stood up. He was winded, clawing his cheeks. He had not dropped his weapon.

"Buddy," he hissed, but then his voice softened. "Buddy. Get off. Come talk to me."

"Philip," said Buddy Kelly.

The elevator did not slow its ascent.

"Buddy, I want to talk. Buddy. Save me from this place. *Come quickly.*" He patted his thighs. "Come, Buddy. Come," he said to an obstinate dog.

The others watched, everybody watched. The monks stopped grading beads, stopped sweeping. The crowd on the lift was silent; even Chester had nothing to say.

“Philip,” Buddy said looking down at him, his voice incredulous.

“Buddy, you came at last. I'm so glad.”

Philip Sims placed his hands on the platform. It was aligned with his chin. He tried to hoist himself up but his right hand wouldn't relinquish the strip of metal. His knuckles were flushed white. The trolley wouldn't budge.

“Buddy, I'm so happy. Listen, just hop off quickly ...” he said.

He was claspng the platform with the nails of his left hand, with the ruler of the right stabbed into the trolley's grid, trying to lift himself up, raising his legs and hooking his shoes in amongst the girders of the undercarriage.

“Please, Buddy.”

His feet slipped off and he almost fell into the shaft; saved by the dagger wedged in the cart's frame. He let it go.

The great square lift ascended above his head.

“Buddy,” he said, his voice ululating, infuriated, defeated, climbing through notes, trying to settle on the right one, trying to find that amicable pitch which was nestled between quarter tones, which he would never find.

“Come back, okay, Buddy? Come back in a few hours. It's me, Philip.”

His spread hands plopped on top of the platform, smearing red; a last futile exertion.

Silence.

They heard him break into sobs.

“*Buddy!*”

And the frenzied man began to shout. A horrendous, wrathful tirade, and between each phrase he slurped in air, bawling, wheezing in air as if he was the last one on the top of the pile, gasping at the last pocket of air.

And when he screamed, his voice cracked and slipped and became high like a small boy. It was a harrowing sound. The wind seemed to jeer him in surges.

These are the shapes of the waves of his wailing, the unequivocal words that were gored into the lavaflow as it erupted from this throat:

You murdered her.

You murdered my Claire.

You put me in hell.

Didn't you Buddy? Why did she love you?

Did you fuck her in the bath?

Is that why she loved you?

I sent the letter, Buddy.

I sent the letter.

These are the words they heard over and over again, in different combinations, for the span of four more storeys. Afterwards, the echoes tarried in the turbulence of the breeze. And these words never left Buddy Kelly's head.

And Chester said, "I'm sure he'll have cooled down in a few hours ... when you go back ..." but not even Ashélene reacted to the fat man. He said, "Good thing they had the fence. *Holy Fuck*".

It would happen in just over an hour.

One hour and sixteen minutes, to be precise, after the moment when time had gotten all mixed up, when Florence had innocently handed over the ring that had carved up the flow of time, when she had thwarted the assassination of Buddy Kelly.

It would be the second instance of such an event in living memory – the first had occurred shortly after Anazi's son was born, in the deluge of blood which had taken his mother's life. The first had occurred when Azania's spirit was comatose with mourning, the event heralding the beginning of a new and difficult era.

In just over an hour, it would be only the second time in their history that the tower's heart would suffer an attack, that the mighty elevator would stop mid-course. And this event would harken the start of a new age, too, a long stuporous epoch of bereavement and sober reflection, the type, endured by many peoples of this earth, that follows in the wake of genocide.

And this second time, the subsequent ischemia would have been portended by the furious red of alpine flames, so that this humble civilisation might never forget the day Azania exploded into war.

And who would be left to cover the bodies, to drag closed the eyes?

But for now, Buddy Kelly was shattered. He had smelled the first noxious curls of the burning shrubland. He had assumed, in his daze, that it could have no external significance, that this was the charred scent of his own devastation. He could not suspect the inferno steered on the racing wind, tearing now around the soldier's peak.

“Trust me, Buddy,” Chester was saying, “just a few hours with Queenie's brood and you'll forget your own name.”

Chester, hyperbolic as always, did not realise how enticing a proposition this was.

“What if I did it?” Buddy said.

Buddy Kelly was in the patio chair, a seat of ignominy. His heavy head was like a globe in his hands. Something was happening inside his skull; an effervescence, a pressure, fizzing and popping, a mudslide of caustic foam pressing against the back his eyes.

Chester now slid a finger into the broad, flat pocket covertly sewn into his Aloha shirt (which kept the floral design unbroken). He jutted out the fat tip of his tongue as he

floundered about in the fabric by his flabby breast. Eventually, he retracted a clear plastic packet. This packet contained small translucent stones.

He attempted to pour only two into his cupped hand, but ended up spilling some of the brilliants into the potholes in the elevator floor.

“Fuck!” he said, deeming them beyond rescue – he would have to climb onto the floor to retrieve them. Chester shrugged, saying to the short fur of Buddy's scalp, “Spilt milk, eh?”

They had transcended the prison. They were travelling through Queenie's harem. The shaft was now surrounded by four walls of grey hardboard which was not, like the chain-link, fitted to the shaft. This box was behind a two-metre-wide ring of floorspace, making a quaint foyer between the hole and the barricade, and the boards spanned only halfway to the ceiling.

Visible through the single doorway, was a strip of a thickset man, the bouncer: a score of tight braids (his pate poking above the partition), a broad, leatherclad shoulder, a matte length of rigid back, a hand holding the other there, a thick leg and heel. He was leaning against the wall and looking outward.

Chester huffed, making a gawky lunge at his togbag, to stash away the remaining rhinestones. He held one up to his eye as if it were a monocle, a kaleidoscope, looking at Buddy Kelly through the crystal's rainbowed lens, beholding him in murky shards.

“Just a speck of glass,” Chester said excitedly (he could hear the moans). He twirled the gem. Its surfaces were slightly concave, its edges slightly rounded. “Just a tiny ball of silicon. This thing. A girl's best, backstabbing friend. This thing, Buddy, you would be unlucky to find in a lucky-packet. But you wouldn't believe the debauchery this piece of glass unlocks. There. Take a look. Amsterdam is play-school.”

Buddy Kelly heard the moaning too. It was a sort of collective gasp, almost tortuous, but it was not in his mind.

He reared his head weakly, squinting through a migraine, a ferocious hangover. He spied through the shrinking gap above the hardboard.

The crucifixes were veiled in red sheets, the four fires were burning, but instead of benches, the storey was crowded with beds, and had a thin maze of corridors between them. And in this scarlet penumbra, a great carnival of depravity was underway, which seemed to reflect, to replicate, the immorality of Buddy's own sullied self-regard.

He apprehended there, between the pillars, a giddy lewdness. There were a hundred women starfished and spread-eagled, bent over, buttocks aloft, as if walking on their

hands, on their knees, prostrate on their sides, pelvises clapping against them, pressed up against the fireplace, and many men in-between. The air was sodden with slippery moans.

There were bodies upon bodies, a rodeo, men standing apart, lazily fondling themselves. There were groups of three in squirming triangles, bigger groups like litters of wriggling puppies, vast daisy-chains of flesh, glistening legs thrust out in the air. There was the trembling softness of inner-thighs, the gluteal fold, the pubis, mammary chutes. There was triple penetration underway, grasping hands leaving trails of treacle. There were fingers tracing tiny circles, gulping mouths, digits probing cockled caverns, a tang, a wetness.

And the heavy-breathing, the moist sighs, gathered in a tempered rhythm, with breasts flapping to its beat, thighs squeezing, flesh naked and pendulous, quivering from slick abrasion, a stroke, a poignant surge of pleasure, a release, another heaving penetration, a withdrawal, a thrust and a gasp, a swell. There were mouths welling from spitting meatus.

And Buddy Kelly regarded this animalism (a heavily pregnant women, another there, men feeding, sealing every orifice), this profligate exhibition, and he saw there in the labial light, in this profane jamboree, feeling now a prodding arousal in confirmation, an enactment of his own carnal soul.

“I’ll be there in a minute. Watch me dive in without feeling the water,” Chester said, putting his palm on Buddy Kelly’s down-covered skull. The big man did not know of the volatile reaction just there, two centimetres beneath his mitten.

“You should come along.” He leaned in, whispered, “I hear you’re into some twisted shit.”

Buddy Kelly swatted his arm away, suddenly inundated with an unfamiliar rage. Buddy resisted it, he resisted it, but only just.

He wanted to see Ashélene, to face her, to hear her eyes whisper their secret, like at the shelf in the mountain’s face, when they were under the blazing stars, the moon, the quiet!

Where did that world go? Her sleepy face, her eyes blinking slowly, saying, I can’t, I have to sleep now. They shut, but opened again, saying, I’d rather watch you, in defiance. But this was all too visceral now, too corporeal. What chance did their coy fatalism have amongst all these thrusting pelvises? Had there really ever been anything? What would be left?

He didn’t want to look (what must she think of him?). He was too afraid she might see him as he was. A man. And by virtue of this, he had never been innocent. And what goodness can there be left without innocence? Without innocence there is nothing but greed.

Buddy Kelly was terrified, but he had already turned his sunken head and so he glanced at her, not over his shoulder, but he glanced past his arm, a horrific anticipation twisting his features. There she sat, cross-legged on a sack, facing away from him. He saw the ringlets of her beautiful curls, a semi-circle of breast. She was playing a clapping game with little Pin. She was facing the harem so that the little girl wouldn't.

His ears felt blocked by this euphoric tide, its drive, its gasp, again, again, a plateau on the edge of climax, teetering, and he thought how he'd like to fuck her, yes, he thought, to fuck her like that, spear her, watch the blood bubble out of the wound, yes, see her arse faintly bulge? That semi-circle of breast? Her legs open wide? Fuck her like the men he had seen (hear them spasm?), unashamedly, viscously. He looked away. His limpid eyes were cold.

Another floor. He waited for a glimpse.

He saw an arena, a Greek theatre, with two dozen nude spectators arranged in the half-circle, a single shape, keeping each other warm with their bodies' heat. There were several performers waiting in the columned skene, and, in the pit, was a woman and a standing man, her throat engorged.

Buddy's scowl was aimed at nothing. He was a bedraggled sailor on a pontoon sprung a leak, out at sea for years, resisting an acerbic sea around him. He was resisting, for his goodness would save him. But it was all a lie. And the raft was sinking fast, only he found now that he had gills.

“You won't see me in there,” said Chester. “It's a competition. To see which guy can last the longest. See, I'm a student of tantra so I'm susceptible to 'spontaneous eruption'. Ahem. Here Buddy.”

Chester prised Buddy's knobby fingers off of his head, off his seething head – and there must have been steam fuming from his nostrils, but Chester didn't see it. Chester put a rhinestone into the hand, curled it closed.

“That's a golden ticket. Outlanders get special treatment. We could team-up.”

Chester like a pig in shit.

“Worthless,” Buddy said.

He liked the sound, so low and gruff, and he thought: so this is what the devil sounds like.

“What's that?”

“It's worthless,” his fist turning the stone to powder.

Chester blurted a sardonic laugh. He was ignorant of the cataclysm. “That's worth as many orgasms as you can fit into twelve hours--”

“How many is that, Chester?” Buddy Kelly said, with these dark eyes and the rings below and the black lacerations above. This is what this wan face was for, this expression now, gashed with blade-edge wrinkles.

“How many is that?” Buddy Kelly said, “When you average one a minute?”

“Touché,” Chester said.

The Clown was slightly perturbed, but for the wrong reasons. He was threatened. A submerged part of him was insecure because if this wet blanket could be funny, what did that say about Clowns?

“But not everyone can multiple my young friend, I can see why you'd be jealous. It's a--”

“Jealous?” Buddy Kelly laughed a malignant laugh of which he did not know he was capable. So that's how you did it, that was the trick: you meant it. Laugh *at* and that was what it sounded like. “Jealous,” Buddy said in his hiss. “Can you even find your prick?”

“Can my prick even find my bo--”

“Shut up,” he snapped, like he'd never said it before. Still in the chair, crammed into himself; his spine a question mark.

“Okay,” said Chester, cottoning on, “I see.”

“Shut up.”

These words launched Buddy Kelly out of the chair, and his arm had tossed it over backwards all on its own. No use for it. No use for inaction. He was right up in Chester's Wayfarers, seeing his own demented face there. Why look away? Why submit, succumb? Why had he ever? This was how simple it was.

“Okay, okay,” said Chester, his hands open, turning to pacification.

In his mind, Chester was patting his inside pocket, feeling for the *Tenderisers*, but he was in his vacation garb. No matter, he had dealt with violent men before; birds of a feather. His diplomatic expression suddenly twinged and the beginnings of a sinister little smile clipped out of the line of his mouth, to spread slowly across to the other side.

“Okay,” Chester said, “I gotta go now, anyway. Look at you. But I got one last joke for you before I go.”

Chester's smile was off-putting. It said the same thing they always said: don't strain yourself, Buddy Kelly. Don't think about it too hard, you poor, precious thing. No, he thought suddenly, and the reaction was underway, and he liked the way it felt, the insurrection. That shot of dissidence, a simple negative, no, this wouldn't do, something was not right and Buddy's arm lashed out (like at the chair before, without instruction).

One moment Chester was standing in front of him with his condescending smile, and the next second was exactly the same, except for his glasses that were removed and flying off the elevator. This, Chester only noticed because everything had suddenly brightened.

The fat man's pupils were starting to dot around like cockroaches caught feeding in the middle of the night. There was a quivering in the whites of his big green eyes, which were a bit too large, a bit too close together for his long, thin-bridged nose, for his puffy cheeks. His lips were now too high, the eyebrows on his long forehead, a little too light.

And how did Buddy react to this? Seeing himself in the Wayfarers but seeing himself, now, for the first time? What's your secret? Your shame? Chester's was his heritage, but, in truth, he only looked foolish because he felt he should. And Buddy Kelly just watched him, his smirk gone now. Buddy Kelly held his eyes. His own were still hard because he was tired of fear, but somehow soft, too.

And Chester said, "Okay, so here it is. My final joke," but his voice had lost its scurrilous sting. It trembled with his eyes, and Buddy looked to him sadly, following the adjustments of his routing irises with his own.

"So here it is ... " Chester raised and spread his hands as if unveiling a banner, but it was unconvincing. "Buddy Kelly!" he said, "Buddy Kelly! Do you get it?"

Buddy Kelly unfurled his fist, manipulated the little rhinestone to the tip of his thumb, all with the single hand, all his fiddling undetectable, cocked his long middle finger. He brought the catapult up, flipped his wrist around, and flicked the glass brilliant. Before it struck, right in the middle of his forehead, Chester's eyes seemed to converge for an instant.

"Go get fucked, buffoon," Buddy Kelly said.

Before he turned away to find Ashélene and little Pin, his rogue hand raised to the man's barrel chest, alighting on his sternum. It gave a gentle push and Chester plopped onto the floor.

On the next storey, a voluptuous woman was waiting in the foyer. She sparkled like the solar trees caught in the pink dawn, like the glittering galaxies over the broken city from the night before.

She wore at least a single ring on every finger (on some she had up to three). Her body was bandaged in a ludicrous jewellery, twisted out of threads of copper wire, which looped over diamonds and emeralds and amber and amethyst; brilliants, spheres and squares and teardrops. Each transparent gem was crudely entangled in the serpentine wire encasing her, each like the buds on Celtic ivy.

This garment wrapped itself around her wrists and ankles, and around her hilly waist in a belt. It snaked around her neck to dangle from her ears, and ran between her legs, forming the skeleton of a bustle behind her.

She was Queenie, festooned like a Christmas tree.

She saw Chester and contracted her index finger. She shook her head like a dominatrix, and he slumped off the lift in obedience.

These chapters are, as of yet, incomplete and have not been included for this thesis submission. However, below is a brief description of what happens. (Spoiler-alert)

As they travel upwards and more pieces of the wooden toy are revealed, Buddy Kelly remembers that he has seen the completed toy before (he had owned one). It is a beautifully assembled wooden monkey, with cane-head hands and feet which can hang from string. They also pass a few floor that have only very old people, and, as they reach the top, a relatively sophisticated laboratory.

Suddenly Azania is thrown into chaos. All the disgruntled outcasts have now become rebels, and have joined with some of Julius's subject who look to overthrow Anazi, on account of his mistreatment of his people. The mountain is engulfed in flames, and the gunfire from Ak47s rings out. The invaders enter through the refuge floors with ladders, slaughtering many inhabitants. In the chaos, Buddy's loses Pin.

Buddy Kelly and Ashelene manage to make it to Anazi's inner sanctum. Ashelene must wait outside. Anazi is an old but sentient man. Here, Anazi explains to Buddy that the tower was given to his ancestors as a type of severance package. The leaders of the former city had a choice: they could either die along with the citizens during the bombings, or take up positions in these towers, to produce cheap goods for Dalphiney city. He also reveals that Anazi has been experimenting on the indwellers; using them as a sample population for genetic therapy and the study of epigenetics (because the population demographics are so easy to monitor). This research into longer life is important for Dalphiney, although the tower is relatively unimportant to them.

The old city had been 'culled' because it had become too threatening economically, and the population too vast for the earth's limited resources.

We discover that the wooden toys are for a Christmas cracker, consumed in Dalphiney. It is not particularly specialised (this toy) or in fact in high demand (in fact the commodity is only in demand once a year). The toy is one in a series of twelve for a particular brand of cracker. Azania is a giant sweatshop and laboratory, which is cheaply maintained through sending only food from the city (it even has its own power supply – the solar trees). Buddy Kelly had recognised the toy because he had once found it in a Christmas cracker, when he was young.

Anazi then reveals that Buddy Kelly is not his son. His son was marked with a tattoo shortly after his birth. This tattoo we have encountered in a character in the city before.

Buddy and Ashelene see Pin's grey Gatsby hat riding by itself down the elevator counter weight. They escape down the counterweight, sliding past the intruders, shrouded in a blanket. They hear the Imam's call to prayer.

Buddy and Ashelene elope into the ruins (she doesn't know that he is not the prince of Azania). Here they are baited and captured by the 'beasts' of the ruins – lawless nomads. She is wounded and Buddy Kelly, with a chance to escape, abandons her.

As the story zooms out we discover that there are simply thousands of these 'Azanais' (the tower societies) scattered throughout this mountainous region. Indeed, Azania is tower number 0068. We discover that Buddy Kelly's former job was to monitor for potential cull targets.

We also discover that the broach Buddy Kelly wore was a hidden camera. His odyssey was for the making of a B-grade documentary, for the enjoyment of the Dalphiney political elite. The pin is discovered and taken back to Dalphiney.

As for Catherine Kelly, a fridge, dropped by Squig whilst returning Michael's furniture with his brother, crushes her at the bottom of the stairs. Her sheep-skin sleepers are seen poking out from underneath it.

Buddy Kelly remains lost in the ruins.

Come to Azania: Full Plot Synopsis

We meet Buddy Kelly, a young man of twenty-five, while he is living with his mother, Catherine, in a spacious flat in Hoopoe Height, a tiny apartment block within the great metropolis of Dalphiney.

His sister has recently died under mysterious circumstances – it seemed a half-hearted suicide attempt, pushed to success by the bite of a Rinkhals. Shortly before her death, Buddy's father, Winch (a smooth-talking hulk of a man), absconded from the family, and they haven't heard from him in months.

One day, two unsavoury goons visit the remaining Kellys (Catherine and Buddy), and demand that they pay back the salesman's debt to their boss. Of course Catherine and Buddy had been unaware of Winch's dealings in his alter life, but they see that they must buckle to these men's demands – for the goons clearly mean business.

Thus, Catherine and Buddy Kelly sell their home (and most of their possessions) over to the two.

They move into a tiny room in a tenement in the city's core.

An unmarked letter arrives for Buddy. It says: Come to Azania. Buddy suspects it to be from his father, and suddenly realises that he is desperate to find and confront the man. He wants to let him know that, since he had left, Claire had died and the family was now in ruins.

Staying at their new home, Buddy Kelly befriends a group of youths, two of whom happen to live next door: these are the uncanny Behr twins (one is wild, strong and mischievous, the other skinny and subdued). Buddy Kelly finds that his quiet demeanour has a place amidst this irreverent group, and things start to look up for him.

The posse goes out one night to see an up-and-coming band. And here Buddy Kelly has a brief encounter with a strange homeless man named Loaf. That same night, he meets a sagely old drunk who spins tales like a bard of old, who alludes to the mysterious place known as Azania.

The letter remains constantly on Buddy's mind, and he feels, always, an overwhelming sense of displacement and guilt. Buddy Kelly seems to have constantly tearing eyes.

Meanwhile, the vile Chester Bosmans is struggling to maintain his career as a professional Jester. His life is a mess and he seems to have fallen out of favour in the circles, but continues to keep up to date with the interesting developments in the city's underworld.

He stumbles upon Buddy Kelly one day on the street. Chester seems to show an inordinate interest in the young man. Maybe it is something he has seen about him, that correlates with something he has heard.

After a few days, Chester meets up with Buddy Kelly and lets him know that he happens to be an old friend of Buddy's boss, and that a consultancy position had since opened up, a job which would take him to a place called Azania. Unbeknownst to Buddy, Bill and Chester are in collusion to get Buddy to Azania (it seems that he is wanted there.)

Azania is a tremendous tower that is wedged in a deep gorge in a massive flat mountain. Thousands of people live in this place, overlooking the ruins of a broken city below, the sea, but no other signs of human life. These people all rely on the tower's tireless elevator to be fed. This elevator is huge, a travelling market/kitchen. It takes 6 hours to travel from the top to the bottom (at 27mm per second). It has only once stopped in the tower's history.

The entire tower seems to produce a single type of wooden toy. The people of Azania work hard, and have their own superstitions which keep them content and afraid of the outside. Periodically, residents are banished for underproducing, for having an uncertified pregnancy, for becoming old.

They believe that the fruits of their labour are used to appease their prophet, Anazi. And they have lived there for so long with their humble theism, that no one can recall a past outside the tower.

No one but the convicts. Sims is one of these, an inmate from Dalphiney (relegated to the 'secure floors' of the tower, which constitute an outsourced prison).

Sims is waiting to murder someone and has become madly obsessed with watching the elevator appear twice a day. In his head, he is constantly counting, and consequently knows exactly when the elevator will come. He believes that from the elevator shaft, the man he fanatically wants to murder, Buddy Kelly, will eventually come.

Meanwhile, Buddy Kelly gets his 'promotion' and is taken by helicopter to the path to Azania (for some reason the pilot will not get too close to the tower). He wears a broach with the dominant political party's insignia (from Dalphiney).

As he approaches the monolith on a gravel path, he sees that it has a warning marking at its apex, a crude and horrific inkblot which morphs in bright blue, which seems to warn of danger. This is the organism's countermeasure to predators.

Inside, it seems that the denizens have *all* been waiting for him. They believe Buddy Kelly to be the son of Anazi, their leader, whom has become cruel in his old age. Their

prophesies predicted his coming. Buddy denies this, but begins to convince himself that perhaps it might be true, perhaps he might be the heir to their small kingdom.

This suspicion seems confirmed when he meets a strange, adventurous girl named Ashelene.

Ashelene, like Buddy, grew up in Dalphiney (he had actually seen her band playing in the nightclub Sliver). She takes him out into the quiet night, through the building's refuge floor, because the tower's residents have begun to mob the lift (they do think, after all, that he is the Saviour returned).

Ashelene explains to Buddy Kelly that there is another tower, just like Azania, in which she was born. She was the daughter of the leader there, Julius. She tells him how she had been sent to the Dalphiney as a child as an act of sympathy by her father, because the birth of Anazi's first son resulted in Anazi's wife's death. Consequently, Anazi sent away his child (who was perhaps Buddy Kelly), because he had been a frail baby, and Anazi didn't want the child's life to be hindered by the lack of education (and medical expertise) in the tower. Julius too, sent away his third daughter – Ashelene.

Azania's son had been meant to return when he came of age. This is why all the residents knew of his existence. He was meant to return and lead them. But Ashelene tells Buddy how Anazi's retinue became greedy, and were enjoying their power too much to want the son back. She also explained that the child's foster parents (in the city) seemed happy that no one had come to collect their adopted son.

Buddy asks why everyone thinks it is him. She says Anazi gave a gift to the surrogate parents, the gold watch which Buddy now wears (which Winch had given him many years ago). Buddy also reflects on how he is so unlike his parents, how he is exactly the right age. He also recognises the toys they produce in the tower, and suspects it was because he spent the first years of his life here. He also begins to remember the cause for his perennial shame and anguish: he had loved his own sister. If he was not a Kelly in earnest then this love would be vindicated.

Upon re-entering the tower, they find Chester on the elevator. He has been rewarded for finding Buddy with a trip to the harem floors of the tower. Chester confirms that it was the watch which drew him to Buddy. He will disembark the lift on the harem floors, but these are above the prison.

They ascend and when they reach Sim's storey he, for the first time ever, is not paying attention to the lift (he seems to be giving up his vendetta). But after a few seconds he sees Buddy and charges towards him with a sharp tool, ready to kill him.

Another denizen, who has encountered Sims's madness before, thwarts the assassination attempt, and Sims has to watch as Buddy cruises by. Here we discover that Philip Sims was in fact Claire's fiancé. He had been a pharmacist, and was convicted for malpractice for giving Claire the pills which she killed herself with, and hence he was incarcerated in the tower. Sims believes Buddy Kelly raped Claire, and that Buddy was thus the reason why she did not love him, the reason why she had killed herself. He also confides at this point, that he sent the letter.

Buddy Kelly is confused and shattered. It appears Winch is not in the tower (Buddy, however, still suspects he might be Anazi) and that he has been drawn here for 2 reasons. The first, of his own volition (because of the letter from Sims), the second, because he is the returning heir, brought here by Chester. They travel towards the apex (where Anazi lives).

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The allegory is up to you.