THE GAME SHOP AND OTHER STORIES

by

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A special note: My stories seek to represent the lived realities of a group of South African people termed, “Cape Coloured”. I write to pay homage to this community in an effort to restore dignity.
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Part I

I wanted to cry for what we have lost because of apartheid, but instead, I rejoice in what we have gained – Freedom of Expression.

I wanted to cry for all the injustices, but instead, I thought of my Ou-Ma’s hands – weathered and scalded from cooking, cleaning, washing dirty clothes and towelling nappies by hand with hard, green soap. She had survived it all. She had a story to tell.

I wanted to cry for my grandfather – for who he was and for who he could have been, but instead, I wrote a story about my Ou-Pa telling stories – our oral history, our culture, it is all we have.
Namesake

Small John was still too young for school; he would need to wait another year when he turned six. His cousins, Jo-Ann, Reagan, and Brent spent most of their day at school. Jo-Ann was in Grade 4 and the twins, Reagan and Brent, were in Grade 2. Their primary school was within walking distance, less than a kilometre away. Along the way, they passed a string of red-brick houses with burglar bars on their windows, tall fences, barbed wire above vibracrete walls enclosing the borders of these houses, and lots of big, barking dogs. In between the houses they passed a BP petrol station, a Shoprite U-Save, and Saint Paul’s Catholic Church. The church was surrounded by tall gates, painted white with castle wall spikes at the top. Brown sand bordered the road to their school. There were no pavements. Their socks were often blackened by wet sand and dirt. Ma and Small John walked the children to school. When the children were safely past the main road intersection, Ma and Small John turned and walked back home. The school was painted peach and white. The playground had – two tyre swings, a steel slide, and a yellow-painted jungle-gym. When it rained, Ma gave the children taxi fare to travel to school. Pa used to drive them to school in the white Datsun 1* bakkie that he’d named ‘Ouma’ 2. He had an accident and ‘Ouma’ was a write-off. Pa didn’t have the money to finance another car. He used to have a business making and installing vibracrete cement walls, but stopped working after his son, John junior, was killed.

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1 pickup truck
2 grandmother
John junior was Ma and Pa’s youngest child and lived at home with them. He was a police detective investigating charges against a high-profile gangster named Donkie for murder, theft, and armed robbery. He was shot and killed outside their home. He was twenty-six.

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Small John’s mother, Ronelda, dropped him off at Ma and Pa’s house every morning at 5:30 a.m. before she went off to work. Ronelda worked in town, as a secretary in the Mayor’s office, and sat in traffic every morning and afternoon. It took her two hours to get into the city centre and back.

Ma put Small John on her bed and let him sleep. John woke up around 7 a.m. and Ma fed him a bowl of Jungle Oats or Mielie³-meal porridge. She ate a slice of toast with apricot jam and drank a mug of tea with powdered skim milk. She always folded the bread in half and dipped her toast into her tea. She gobbled down her food before the other grandchildren arrived around 7:30 a.m. Their mother, Lorraine, dropped them off at the house before school.

Lorraine was a school secretary in Mitchell’s Plain. She was always running late. Their father, Ronald, was a schoolteacher. Lorraine and Ronald were divorced. He remarried and moved upcountry. He was no longer in his children’s lives.

Lorraine was Ma and Pa’s daughter and their only remaining child.

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When Ma and Small John returned home, they opened the Game shop for business. Ma used the extended garage as a space for her arcade games venue. Inside the venue, Ma also had a house-shop. Ma’s house shop sold the most popular treats

³ maize-meal cereal
and snacks that attracted the children from the neighbourhood. The local clinic staffs and residents came to the Game shop to buy convenience items for dinner or to stock up on home supplies.

The Game shop was Ma and Pa’s livelihood. Pa was not working, and Ma needed to make money to cover their household expenses.

Small John sat in the Game shop with Ma. He watched her as she handed items to her customers and they gave her cash or coins in return. She tuned in to Radio Tygerberg and listened to “the word of the Lord”. John tuned out. He wanted to go inside to speak to Pa.

After a few minutes, he told Ma he was going inside to Pa’s room. When he got there, Pa’s door was closed and he knocked softly.

“Who is it?” Pa asked. “What do you want?”

“It’s me,” Small John whispered in a nasal voice.

“Who’s me?” Pa cleared his throat. “Who are you?”

“It’s me, John,” he yelled. “Can I open?”

“My namesake! Ja, come in.” Pa turned to face the door and adjusted his hearing aid.

Small John walked in and asked Pa if he could sit down on the bed and watch TV. Kideo cartoons and Liewe Heksie would be starting soon.

Pa moved onto his side and curled the pillow under his head. He patted the bed for Small John to climb up. Pa switched on the TV and turned to SABC 2’s Tube channel that scheduled children’s programming. Pa turned down the volume and turned his back to Small John.

After a few moments, he was snoring and sleeping with his mouth open.
An hour or two later, Small John woke Pa up and asked him to tell a story.

“What time is it?” Pa asked and looked around hazily. He stumbled out of bed as he got up to pee. The only time Pa left his room those days was to use the bathroom. Ma brought his food to his room. Pa only left the house once a month to go to the gym, where he sat in the sauna for an hour. His friend Leonard picked him up and dropped him off again. Before John junior died, he visited the racecourse every second week to bet on horses – ‘Goodluck Charlie’ or ‘Marlena’. Pa only took Jo-Ann along. Small John cried in Ma’s arms every time he watched them leave together. He didn’t understand why he could not go along. Jo-Ann could pass for white. She was light-skinned with sharp features and straight-hair. The racecourses were unofficially still run as “whites only” establishments, even though apartheid was now – a thing of the past. Pa and Jo-Ann were the only ones in their family, who could effectively, ‘play white’. Jo-Ann came back and told the cousins stories to make them “naar4” about how she “lekker5 enjoyed eating boerewors6 rolls and vanilla ice cream” at the racecourse.

Pa left the room with the bucket he used at night as a urinal. He came back with the cleaned, white, Gatti’s ice-cream bucket smelling of Jik bleach. Pa told Small John to go play outside or go sit by Ma as he got his clean clothes and underwear together for his bath.

“Pa”, John asked, “Tell me a story.”

“Pa don’t feel like it now, maybe later.”

“Please, Pa,” John begged. “Please tell me a story.”

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4 jealous
5 enjoyed
6 A type of sausage which originated in South Africa
“Why are you such a nuisance?” Pa snapped. “Your mother must put you in school.”

Small John bit his quivering lower lip. He remembered that Pa didn’t like crying children. Ma always used to tell the children not to cry, or Pa would come and hit them. Small John was sad that Pa did not want him around. Otherwise, why would he have said that Small John’s mother must put him in school? He just wanted to be close to Pa. He left the room and went back to join Ma in the house-shop.

Usually, around 2:30 p.m. the older cousins came home from school. They walked through the front door and threw their bags down in the living room before making their way to the kitchen to greet Ma. Then they walked over to Pa’s room to greet him. Pa would be watching cricket. He didn’t want to be disturbed. They came in quietly, gave him a kiss on the cheek that he pointed to with his index finger, and left his room.

Every afternoon, Ma told them to wash out their school shirts and socks. Once they had done this, Jo-Ann and Small John were sent to the shop to buy Pa’s Cape Argus newspaper, salted peanuts, and two Compral headache tablets. Sometimes Pa asked Brent and Reagan to rub out his feet with Campher ointment. His diabetic foot was often swollen. He had the right foot elevated on two pillows. Pa sent Ma to the clinic opposite their house to get his Metformin tablets. The twins massaged around the foot with one hand and pinched their noses with the other.

Ma would remind them to wash their hands before they sat down to eat. She made sandwiches with the previous night’s leftovers, like curry or tomato-

bre
die. Or she made peanut butter and apricot jam sandwiches.

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7 tomato casserole dish
They sat at the table, ate, and told Ma about their day at school.

Ma stood in front of the gas camping stove and listened as she boiled water for tea. If they were still hungry, they would need to drink tea to fill their stomachs.

Small John usually ate with his older cousins and loved to listen to their stories from school. What had they learned that day?

“Multiplication tables!” Jo-Ann shouted out.

“We learned about animals!” Reagan shouted louder.

“Blue Whales are the biggest animals in the whole wide world,” Brent said and stretched his arms out wide to demonstrate the sheer size.

Ma smiled or laughed at the way they told their stories. Then she would kiss everyone on the lips and tell them to go play outside. If they wanted to, they could help her in the Game shop.

Jo-Ann preferred to keep her clothes clean. She offered to help Ma so she would be able to eat the stock. She ate Lays salt and vinegar chips (sneaking bags into the room for Pa) and spicy, red jawbreaker sweets called ‘fireballs’. But mostly, she could have access to as much Chappies bubblegum as she wanted.

Brent and Reagan played soccer in front of the house, pretending they were the next Benni McCarthy. They sang: “Bafana – Bafana!” as they dribbled the ball and practised balancing it on their heads.

Small John returned to Pa’s room after everyone else had gone off together. Pa’s door was open. Pa’s skin was covered in red and pink blotches from his hot bath. His fine, brown hair was wet and slicked back to expose his receding hairline.

“Come sit here by Pa,” Pa smiled showing teeth and raising his eyebrows.
Small John climbed onto Pa’s bed and sat next to him. Pa was watching cricket, an ODI between South Africa and New Zealand.

“New Zealand is my team,” Pa said. “I always want the other team to win, to beat South Africa.”

“Why Pa?” Small John asked, but Pa’s eyes were back on the game.

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Pa had been a semi-professional cricket player. In the 70s, Pa had played cricket from the age of seventeen to his twenty-first birthday. He received many trophies and awards as ‘man of the match’. He was voted as one of the top form batsmen on the Western Province Cricket team. However, when Pa got married to Ma, who was ‘Coloured’, he had to be reclassified as ‘Coloured’ so they could live together. As a result, he could never play professionally for the South African national team – an all-white team during apartheid.

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Small John stood outside Pa’s room. He listened to the tune that played before the 7 ‘o clock news. He knew better than to disturb Pa while he watched the news. Ma also came into Pa’s room to watch the prime time news on the only TV in the house. She took Small John by the hand and walked in quietly. She squinted at the TV and sat down. Small John climbed onto the bed and sat between Ma and Pa.

“*Waas my kos, vrou*?” Pa asked Ma, turning to face her.

“*Da binne,*” Ma stared at the TV. “I will fetch it for you after the news.”

“You’ll go fetch it when I want it, *verstaan dij vrou*?” Pa’s voice boomed.

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8 Where is my food, woman?
9 Inside, in the kitchen
10 Do you understand me, woman?
Small John felt frightened of Pa. He didn’t understand why Pa spoke to Ma this way.

“Ja, John,” said Ma, avoiding eye contact.

“You bladdy slime-ball boesman” Pa raised his hand to slap the back of her head, and Ma bent down. It was only a warning.

“Los my uit!” Ma said. “I’m watching the news. I did nothing to you. Keep your hands to yourself.”

Pa turned to Small John, his nostrils flaring. “If you gonna stay here for the news, you must be quiet.”

“Yes, Pa.” Small John crawled towards Ma and sat on her lap.

Ma watched until weatherman Pete waved goodbye. Then she left the room to answer a knock on the door. Small John sat alone with Pa. This time he wasn’t going to ask for a story. He wondered when Ma would come back to fetch him. He didn’t want to be alone with Pa now.

Pa flipped through the channels. Small John stared at the TV. Then turned to look at Pa. Then turned back to the TV. He stared at it long and hard. Pa was not saying anything. He wanted Pa to say something. He wanted to say something. In his mind, he rehearsed the words. He would sound as nice as possible so Pa wouldn’t use the booming voice on him.

“Pa, can you tell me a story?” he said and leaned in towards Pa but didn’t touch him.

“Peter Piper picks a pack of pickled pepper,” Pa said, smiling wide.

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11 You bloody bushman (derogatory term, alluding to her Khoi ancestry)
12 Leave me alone
“Yor! What’s that Pa?” Small John smiled open-mouthed, a front tooth missing, raising his eyebrows to mimic Pa.

Pa smiled and chuckled.

Small John knew that this meant Pa would not give him an answer.

Ma came back into the room to fetch Small John. His mother, Ronelda, had a strained relationship with Pa and could not enter his house.

“Love you Pa,” Small John said before he left. He kissed Pa on the cheek.

“Pa se chind,” he smiled. “I see you tomorrow. Tell your mummy to bring Pa something nice.” He turned back to gaze at the TV.

“Yes, Pa,” Small John replied.

Pa shouted something at Ma about his food. “I will get you,” he said. “Once they are gone, djy sal sien.”

Small John gave the message from Pa to his mother as she helped him put on his jacket. Ronelda forced a smile and told him to kiss Ma goodbye. Small John wondered why Pa and his mother never spoke. He also wondered why his mother could not enter the house. Ma asked Ronelda to leave quickly so she could give Pa his food “before the trouble starts”.

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When the cricket season was over, Pa invited the cousins to his room and told them stories about his childhood. He loved to have them seated on the floor at his feet and see their little faces staring up at him with wonder and excitement. When Pa told stories they had to be silent, listen carefully, and pay attention to him by maintaining

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13 Wow!
14 Pa’s child
15 Just wait and see
eye-contact. Usually, Brent and Reagan walked in late and had short attention spans. They fidgeted or mumbled something to each other all while Pa was talking. The transgressor would be elbowed by Jo-Ann or hushed, “shhhhhhh!” by Small John.

Pa then glared at both “troublemakers” and continued his story.

“My granny was very strict. She would send me to the shop to buy a loaf of bread and a box of matches. She would spit on the floor and warn me that if I’m not back before her spit dries up, I will get a hiding.”

Silence filled the room. Then Pa continued.

“You know, when I was a young boy, I caught on a lot of shit,” he chuckled. “I put drawing pins on my class teacher’s chair, and I stole the guavas from the neighbour’s tree and shot down his racing pigeons with a sling, ay, I was naughty.”

He chuckled again and coughed. He took a few gulps from his water bottle, *glunk, glunk, glunk.*

Pa didn’t like to be interrupted when he was telling a joke or a story. He would get angry and lash out at the culprit with a booming, “Shut your face!” His voice like thunder and lightning. It rattled Brent and Reagan. Sometimes when they were not listening, Pa pulled their ears and said, “Listen!” Or as they sat on their little stools, he pinched and squeezed their thighs with his big, pale, veiny hands and said, “Stop it!’ When they had gotten into “big trouble”, Pa threatened to give them a hiding with the leather whip *sjambok.* “Stop-your-shit!” he whipped the bed and told them to imagine it was their buttocks.

This one time, Brent was playing alone in Pa’s room while he was at the gym. Brent bent and broke the aerial of Pa’s TV. When Pa got back from the gym and saw this, he called the cousins into his room and lined them up. He asked the “culprit” to
step forward. No one did. Pa threatened to give all of them a hiding with the *sjambok* if the “guilty one” did not come forward immediately. Brent stepped forward and began to cry. Pa told the others to leave the room.

Pa gave Brent a few whips on his buttocks with the *sjambok*.

He ran out of Pa’s room and into the kitchen where Ma and the other cousins were waiting for him. He cried louder and harder as Ma held him in her arms.

Ma told him Pa was right to give him a hiding because he was naughty. He asked Ma if he could sit on a cushion at the kitchen table. She felt sorry for him and gave him and the other cousins each a scoop of vanilla ice cream.

This angered Pa, and he said she was “spoiling them” and making them “*swak groot*” weak.

The next day, Brent was too scared to go into Pa’s room again after his whipping. Pa said that if he doesn’t come inside to say hello or goodbye that Pa would give him “another hiding” because he was “keeping himself *ougat*” weak. Brent went into the room to greet Pa and carefully kissed him on his cheek.

After that, Brent and Reagan began to fear Pa and visited his room less frequently. Ma let them play outside or stay in the house-shop with her.

Jo-Ann took up netball at school and spent her afternoons at her friend’s house.

Soon, Small John was the only one who sat and talked to Pa in his room every day. Small John loved Pa’s stories. Pa loved to tell stories to good listeners.

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16 raising them to be weak individuals
17 too big for their shoes
Small John no longer spent his afternoons after school watching cricket with Pa or listening to Pa tell stories. He didn’t want to miss out on the happenings in and around Ma’s Game shop where the other cousins were spending their afternoons.

Everyone, except Pa, helped out in the Game shop. Pa didn’t support Ma’s business because he thought it would “bring trouble”, so he refused to have any part in it. Ma gave the cousins each their own tasks to do. She asked Small John, who was now in Grade 4, to pack the Coke or Schweppes Granadilla Twist cold drinks into the Coke fridge before he left for school in the morning. She asked Jo-Ann, who was thirteen and in high school, to manage the Game shop in her absence. When Ma left the Game shop to buy supplies at the wholesaler, or when she was sick and visited the clinic for treatment, Jo-Ann helped customers and was the only one allowed to manage the cash flow while Ma was away. Jo-Ann’s duties included taking cash from customers and giving the desired items in return, the swopping of currency for game coins, giving white balls to the pool players, and assisting those who needed help operating the machines. Ma asked the twins, Reagan and Brent, now both eleven-years-old and in Grade 6, to help her close the shop in the evenings. They had to remove all stock from the crates and jars and bring the items into the house overnight for safekeeping – the other house-shops had been broken into and looted by the local gangs. At the end of each day, Ma did stocktaking and counted the cash and coins in her silver tin ‘tickie-box’. She recorded the amount in her boekie and recorded the names and amounts of those who had bought on skuld that day. The customers who bought items on skuld often arranged with Ma to pay her on the 15th – when the clinic staffs were paid – or at the end of the month – when the resident workers from the
block of flats were paid. Once she had completed her bookkeeping, Ma put the day’s profit into her moon bag.

After she locked up, she bolted the black-painted security gates. She shook the gates twice to make sure that they really were locked. She hurried to the stoep with the front door keys already in her hand and without wasting any time she let herself in and shut the door quickly behind her. She hid the day’s profit under her mattress.

Every day, Ma dressed in a tracksuit with Reebok takkies and tied her black hair with grey streaks up in a bun, before covering her head with a cap. She wore the black moon bag strapped around her waist. Ma closed the Game shop just before 7 o’clock so she could still be in time to watch the prime time news with Pa.

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Ma’s Game shop was located opposite the road from the local clinic and down the street from a large block of government housing flats - apartments. The Game shop’s convenient location attracted many customers from the area as well as from the surrounding areas. Mostly, children ages seven to seventeen frequented the Game shop before and after school. The Game shop was open Monday to Saturday from 7 a.m.

The Game shop had two pool tables, five classic arcade game machines – Street Fighter, Puzzle Bobble, Pac-Man, Super Mario Brothers and Double Dragon – all of which were coin-operated. In the right-hand corner of the venue stood a jukebox. It was red and yellow and played the latest songs from the 90s, 80s and 70s. Ma rented the pool boards and games from a white businessman who sent his son to

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18 sneakers
collect their money from her at the end of every month. Ma filled an FNB bank bag with cash, mostly R50s and R100 notes to pay him for the use of the machines.

The house shop inside the Game shop was a small business selling convenience items, such as fruits and vegetables, oil, flour, milk, sugar, candles, matches, and lighters. She also sold sweet treats such as Fizzers, Wilson blocks, Fireballs and Power Sour Jawbreakers, Cadbury slabs, Crack-a-Snack chips, Nik-Naks, Flings, Big Corn Bites, cold drinks, cigarettes, and many other treats.

***

Each of the cousins got a turn to go with Ma to the retail and wholesale trading warehouse, 1-UP Cash and Carry. The warehouse scent was a mix of nail polish remover and sweet bubblegum. It was cold inside with many large, industrial-sized walk-in coolers and freezers. The workers wore white aprons.

Ma grabbed a trolley and filled it with bulk bags and boxes of supplies for the shop. Ma also exchanged her cash for coins at the tills and traded her larger notes for smaller bills. This is how she would “make change” for her cash float. When they got back from the wholesalers, the cousins unpacked the shop supplies – filling the fridge with cold drinks, the crates with chips, and the jars with sweets and lollipops.

***

Since Small John had been helping out in the Game shop, Pa spent his days alone in the house. Jo-Ann and Small John continued to run errands for Pa when they got home from school, but most of the time, Small John only visited Pa to say hello and goodbye. Pa asked Small John to come by in the afternoon, but he wanted to
spend all his time at the Game shop with his cousins and friends. Small John had outgrown his fascination with Pa.

Sometimes Pa surprised the grandchildren by visiting them in the Game shop if the house got too quiet for him.

“I’m just keeping an eye on you,” Pa said as he walked into the shop and winked at them.

“Pa!” they shouted in unison. Jo-Ann smiled. Small John and the twins looked confused and surprised. Pa was unpredictable. They were excited to see him, but also nervous.

“What you doing here, Pa?” Small John said and walked over to hug Pa. He wrapped his arms around Pa’s belly and back.

“My namesake, why you don’t come visit me anymore?” Pa said and patted Small John on the back. The other cousins hugged Pa too.

“Sorry Pa,” Small John first looked away and then looked up at Pa, “It’s a lot of fun to work in the Game shop. All my friends come here now, and we play games. They think the Game shop is kwaaai. They wish their ouma also had one.”

“Ja!” Reagan shouted out.

“And we get to eat all the luxuries we want,” Brent added.

The cousins gigged and high-fived one another when Brent said this.

Small John nodded his head in agreement.

“Ma is spoiling you!” Pa snapped.

The twins stopped giggling. Jo-Ann turned to help a customer. Small John looked down at his bare brown feet.

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19 cool
20 grandmother
“Yous\textsuperscript{21} must eat all your food, not all these luxuries,” Pa said and walked out.

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Pa didn’t like that the grandchildren helped Ma in the Game shop. He didn’t want them to have jobs when they should be out playing and “being children”. He shared stories about his childhood with the grandchildren, stories about how he was forced to work as a child to support himself and his grandmother. Ma felt that the jobs in the Game shop gave the grandchildren a sense of responsibility. Pa often scolded Ma if she left the grandchildren alone in the Game shop. He didn’t think it was a safe place for them and told Jo-Ann to call him on the house phone if Ma left her to manage the Game shop on her own.

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Ma told the cousins that a man named \textit{Donkie} was responsible for orchestrating the murder of Ma and Pa’s son, John junior. He had been killed outside their home – shot nine times in the chest and a final bullet to the head. Ma ran out thinking it was their neighbour Valerie’s son, Nigel, who got shot since Nigel was involved with gangs. When Ma got to the van and saw her son, she collapsed. The local journalist covering the story in the newspaper described Ma as “inconsolable”. Pa cried that day too, and then he never cried again.

Ronelda, who was John junior’s girlfriend when he passed, had come to his funeral to “ask Ma and Pa for forgiveness” for the role she played in his death. Ronelda and John junior had a son together, a baby boy they named, John. Ronelda told Ma she was being “blackmailed” by \textit{Donkie} and that he threatened to kill their

\textsuperscript{21} You all
child, Small John if she did not help them kill John junior. At the funeral, Ronelda wept and told Ma “the full story” of what had taken place.

Ronelda said John junior came over to her parent’s house to pick her up and came inside for a few minutes while she got dressed. She offered him a drink and slipped something into it. They finished their drinks and left in his SAPS\textsuperscript{22} police van. They drove over to his house, and he parked outside. They sat in the van and talked for a while until he passed out. Then she got out of the van and ran off. Two men with handguns approached the police van and saw that he was sleeping. They shot and killed him.

Ma dried her eyes with a crumpled tissue and said, “thank you for telling me the truth, Ronelda, but the truth cannot bring my son back,” Ma closed her eyes and tears ran over her high cheekbones. “You should have gone to the police. Why didn’t you turn state witness so you could get protection?”

“I was scared, Ma Sophie,” Ronelda cried, “They said they would kill me and my child if I go to the police.”

“Don’t ever come back here!” Pa roared and slapped Ronelda.

“I’m sorry,” Ronelda whispered, then turned and walked away.

Later that day, Ma called Ronelda and said she would protect her from Pa and that she wanted to be in Small John’s life. Ma offered to help her raise Small John. Ronelda accepted her offer and stayed out of Pa’s way.

Ma got an open casket at the funeral to show everyone what Donkie’s guards had done to her son.

\textsuperscript{22} South African Police Service
After John junior died, Ma decided to open the Game shop. She envisioned a place where young children could “come to have fun and buy from me” in a safe space free from the influence of gangs and drugs.

It was not long before Donkie found out about Ma’s Game shop.

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A few months after the Game shop first opened its doors, the Sexy Boys gang leader, “Donkie” paid Ma a visit. The Sexy Boys gang were well known in the neighbourhood for their drug-dens, armed robberies, and murders. Donkie and his gang spread fear and terror, holding the community hostage as they operated their illegal businesses. He had a business that was similar to Ma’s Game shop, except that it only masqueraded as an arcade games venue and house-shop for children. He named it “Bulls” after the rugby team he supported. In reality, “Bulls” was the kind of place where drug users and schoolchildren alike could buy and sell drugs. They sold Mandrax, “Buttons”, Dagga, Ecstasy and Tik. A rival gang, “The Americans” also wanted to capitalise on this market. They too set up a similar business under the same pretence. They named theirs, “Yankees”. Donkie had the competition eliminated; starting with an armed robbery, followed by a drive-by shooting.

When Donkie walked in, the girls in the Game shop recognised him and ran out. The boys said, “Salute General” with a raised thumb, and they carefully made

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23 Formerly, it was a prescription tablet. In the 1960s and 1970s it was prescribed as a sleeping tablet.
24 Marijuana
25 Methamphetamine
26 The ‘Americans’ gang is a large street gang, an organized crime group, based on the outskirts of Cape Town known as the Cape Flats. They are active in most Coloured communities of the Cape Flats.
27 This greeting serves as a sign of respect when someone of ‘rank’ in the gang community is recognized and acknowledged as superior to the person ‘saluting’ him. Basically, they got this concept from the U.S.A Military ranks and armed forces.
their way past him. Word quickly spread, “Donkie is in die poste” by Ma Sophie’s Game shop.” The message was carried over from child to parent to a neighbour to the whole neighbourhood. Ma and Pa’s neighbour, Mrs Davids, called the police. The police station commander told Mrs Davids they would wait until Donkie had left before they “intervened”. Community complaints against Donkie were always handled in the same way – the Constables came around and took a statement, then they would burn the statement with their cigarette lighters before they got back to the police station. Even if Ma were to visit the station to give another statement or file a case report, the docket would ‘go missing’. The local police were both afraid of Donkie, and some were on his payroll.

Ma held Donkie’s gaze as she walked over to him.

“I don’t want to talk to you, vuil gemos!” Ma’s hands trembled, and she made fists. “You will burn in hell for what you did to my baby.”

“Die vrou is mal!” Donkie chuckled and turned to face his guards standing behind him with Vektor R4 assault rifles in hand. He waved them away and they walked out. They stood outside and kept watch for the police. It was common knowledge that these assault rifles were unlawful and probably unlicensed ammunition. Usually, the local police officers who ‘lost’ all of Ma’s statements were the ones who sold these SADF weapons to gangsters like Donkie.

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28 ‘The General’ is usually the highest ranking member in the Numbers gang and is said to know all the laws of the gang. He is part of the ‘Number ones’ structure within a two structure hierarchy.
29 Donkey is here and in position
30 dirty piece of filth
31 this woman is crazy
32 South African Defense Force
A few months earlier, the local police captain was arrested and charged with “aiding and abetting members involved in criminal activity” when he was found with R100 000 in cash at the time of his arrest. He later said in court that he had been supplying the gangsters with police ammunition for many years. He did not mention Donkie or the Sexy Boys. He also added that he was not the only one that was involved and that he was told to do it by “someone much higher up in the police ranks”.

“So you think you can operate a business in my area,” Donkie grinned and pulled out his 9mm Parabellum gun from his pocket. He rested it on the pool table.

“Get out!” Ma shouted. “I am not scared of you. I know your mother. Dij’s ‘n katipie teen my33. This is my place. You will not scare me with your guns.”

“You know my mother, so what,” he said, picking up his gun and pointing it at her head. “If I wanted to have her killed she would be dead too. I could kill you right now if I wanted to. But I didn’t come here for a fight.” He lowered his arm and put the gun back into his pocket.

“You are a coward hiding behind that gun.” Her voice was trembling now. Ma pulled out the Swiss army knife she carried in her tracksuit pants pocket. She waved it at him.

“What are you going to do with that ou vrou34?” he laughed.

“I’ll use it to stab you in the heart.”

He folded his hands like a koeksister35 and smiled.

“I don’t take threats from skollie laities.” Ma said, gripping the knife tighter.

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33 You are a little child compared to me.
34 Old lady
35 A koeksister is a traditional Mayalan/Dutch confectionery made of fried dough infused in syrup or honey.
“Djy hou vir jou nogal sterkgevriet.” His smile faded. “Don’t you ever forget who I am,” he lifted his t-shirt and revealed his torso covered in $$$ tattoos in black and olive-shaded ink. “You don’t want to end up dead like your son.”

“Fok hier uit you devil!” Ma cried out and pointed her knife at the door. “This place will stay open. In memory of my son. I will operate in your area because this is my area too. You have scared everyone away, but you won’t scare me. Fok jou and your Sexy Boys!”

Donkie slowly lit a cigarette. He was wearing black-framed sunglasses, a black wristwatch, and black Nike takkies with the white Nike chuppie38 on it.

“I see you want an early retirement,” he said blowing out white smoke. “I can arrange that. Quickly and easily.”

“Leave now! Loop!” she shouted at the top of her voice.

Donkie turned his back and said, “This is your first and last warning. Next time I won’t be so nice.” He walked out.

Ma’s hands were trembling as she opened her palms. She was so angry she burst out in tears. She ran into the house and into Pa’s room. Pa looked at Ma wide-eyed. Ma struggled to get the words out.

“Donkie was here,” she cried. “At the Game shop.”

Pa jumped up and grabbed his panga machete from under the bed.

“Put that down!” Ma shouted. “Hy’s weg.”40

Pa made his way out to the Game shop with the big knife in hand.

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36 Loosely translated: You are very stubborn
37 Get the fuck out of here
38 Sign, Trademark – referring to the Nike Swoosh trademark
39 Walk, go!
40 He has left
“John, get back in the house,” Ma followed and tried to hold him back. “What good is that going to do?”

“Didn’t I tell you this would happen?” Pa pulled his arm away and out of Ma’s grip. “Your stupid Game shop attracted that low life. You put my grandchildren in danger. Where are they?” Pa’s eyebrows were pulled skew.

“They left. Their mothers picked them up from me an hour ago. They didn’t get a chance to say goodbye to you.”

Pa stood in front of the Game shop with Ma.

Mrs Davids came out, saw Pa with the panga, and ran back into her house. From there, she eavesdropped and peeped through the curtains.

“I put him out, hy sit nie weer sy voete hier nie!” Ma said, her nostrils flaring. “I gave him a piece of my mind. And plus, the Lord will punish him for what he did.”

“This was just a warning,” Pa said and pointed the panga at her. “If you stay open, they will shut you down just like they shut down Yankees. Then you will have nothing!”

Ma turned her back to Pa and locked up the Game shop.

“Will that satisfy you? Pa asked. “Or must someone get killed before you will close down this place?”

“I won’t let him shut me down,” Ma said as she bolted the security gates. “This place will stay open for the children of this community. This is a safe place for them. He will not bully me,” she shook the gates twice to make sure that they were locked. Slowly, she walked back into the house.

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41 He won’t set foot here again
A week later, the Game shop was broken into and vandalised. Ma told the grandchildren that Donkie was a “dangerous man”. Pa called the grandchildren to his room and told them they were no longer allowed to help Ma in the Game shop.

“It’s too dangerous,” Pa said.

“But we love the Game shop!” Jo-Ann cried.

“And Ma needs our help!” Brent protested.

“We can protect Ma from the skollies,” Reagan said and pretended to fire shots with his toy gun. “We can shoot them like so: Ba! Ba! Ba!”

The grandchildren laughed.

“This is not a joke!” Pa’s voice echoed through the house.

“We don’t want to be stuck in the house with you,” Small John whispered and avoided eye contact with Pa.

Pa was quiet for a moment and turned to face Small John. “I will tell you more stories, and you can watch your programmes on the TV.”

“We don’t want to listen to your stories anymore.” Small John looked down at his black Toughees school shoes. “We want to be in the Game shop with Ma.”

The other grandchildren nodded in agreement.

Pa turned up the volume on the TV. The afternoon news showed the highlights of the cricket. “Go,” Pa’s eyes were glued to the TV, “before I bliksem all of you.” Pa’s voice had no angry tone to it this time. He just sounded sad.

The cousins were not sure what to do. Jo-Ann nudged the twins and walked out first. The twins nudged Small John and followed their big sister. Small John did

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42 Strike, hit
not leave with them. He stayed for a while and tried to get Pa’s attention. Pa did not speak to him again or look in his direction. He turned and walked out.

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After the break-in, Ma decided to close down the Game shop and move out of the area. Ma told the grandchildren it was “the hardest decision I’ve ever had to make”, but that Pa was right. Donkie’s guards would come back. Things would only get worse. Their family had been through enough.

The grandchildren cried along with Ma the day she closed the Game shop doors for good. She wiped her tears away and put up the ‘For Sale’ sign for the house.

Ma and the grandchildren walked into the kitchen where Pa was making his favourite tomato and garlic salad.

“What are you going to do now, Ma?” Jo-Ann asked as she sat down at the kitchen table. The other cousins sat down too.

“I’m going to open another business,” Ma responded with a wide grin and laughed as she looked at Pa.

Pa rolled his eyes and mumbled “die vrou is mal” as he walked out of the kitchen with his salad bowl in hand.

“Another Game shop?” Small John’s eyes lit up.

“No, my baby, Ma is done with that now,” she smiled at him and pinched his cheek. “Maybe I just have a fruit and vegetable stall at the Epping market.”

“Or you can sell guava suckers!” Brent shouted out and licked his lips.

“Or you can sell doughnuts and koeksisters!” Reagan added and rubbed his hands together.

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43 stand or stall
“Ja,” Ma said, her voice softer as she turned to the stove. “I will be okay. Your Ma knows how to survive.”

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Coming Home

My grief is like a stone weighing heavy in my pocket. It’s what I have in place of a son. It never goes away.

The house is so quiet now. Sometimes I walk into his room imagine that he’s going to jump out of the cupboard or step out from behind the door and surprise me. I want him to make me laugh again. I miss him most when I am happy.

It’s been fifteen years, and I can still remember his scent. I remember how he loved bananas on his bread, thick butter, coke mixed with his ice-cream. He ate funny stuff. Even ants and snails and beetles when he and his friends played ‘survivor-survivor’. He liked me to put honey in his tea, and I would call him a “little old man”, and he would call me a “little old lady”. Even when I look at his photos now, he comes alive. I remember him telling me:

“Mummy I want this... mummy I’m hungry... mummy I don’t want to wash my socks
and shirt out, I want to go play outside... mummy I don’t want to go to school.”

My son is in the ground. Ek loop rond, ek swêrf. That is my lot. Many a time I sit at the foot of his grave, and we spend hours sharing the silence. We are in an everlasting silent conversation. My love for him is everlasting. My everlasting love fits like a glove...I should have been returned to the soil before him. I should be the one resting in the grave, not him, not my baby. Maar die Here het hom weg gevast. God said: “It is his time to go,” and changed Nature’s course, so I had to put him in a coffin. Ma aai, dai’s ma hoe die lewe is.
I went to visit him on his birthday last week. I threw out the stale water that smelled like rotten eggs. I filled the glass jars with fresh water like I do every week so that I could put in fresh flowers. This week, I put the carnations into the jars to bloom. I would tidy up around his head and feet, so it looks nice. He was a neat and tidy boy, my son. He would want me to take care of things. I missed him a lot that day. I missed him, and I missed my mother. I lost them both at the same time. I spent my time in the graveyard between the trees, lying on the carpet of leaves and pine needles. I walked around looking at the gravestones and dusting off crosses of wood with tissues I carry in my purse. I sit and read the names of those just like my son, who has gone too soon, and I know many of them have been forgotten.

I stayed there deep into the night. Lying on my back on the only gravestone I could find, an old granite gravestone of Luke Engelbrecht, born 17 August 1989 and died 19 June 1997. He was eight years old. Still a baby. Two years younger than my baby when he died. Borrowing his resting place, I fell asleep crying for him and his mother, and for my child.

I woke up with a headache. The cemetery caretaker was standing over me with a torch pointed at my face. I could only see his shadow. The light blinded me. He asked me to leave.

“Is jy al weer hier?" Lukas said with a slur, smelling like Old Brown Sherry. “You can’t sleep here. You must go home. Waar is jou mense?" I got up, dragging my rheumatic legs. I put a R20 note in his hand and asked him to look after my son until I returned.

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47 Are you here again?
48 Where is your family
When I go visit Modderdam cemetery, I feel at home. My son is there. He is my home.

I promised I would never leave him. A few weeks before he died, there was shooting outside our house. The local gangs were shooting all night, and David was so scared. David, me and my other child, Peter, were lying with our heads rested on the ground. Our cheeks were cold and started to stick to the ceramic tiles. David asked,

“How long, mummy?”

“Not for long, my boy, don’t worry, it’s going to be okay, it-will-pass-it-doesn’t-last-it-will-pass...” I made up rhymes to keep him calm, to make him laugh.

“Why do they always shoot here by us, mummy?” David asked. “My friend from school says they don’t shoot so much where he live. Why the gangsters shoot here by us?”

“Because this is not a good place to live David,” I responded. “We live between a bunch of tik-kop49Coloured gangsters who think they are big and strong because they have guns and knives to threaten and kill our people.”

“But you can make a lot of money from tik50,” Peter said to his little brother.

David turned to face Peter.

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49 meth-head
50 methamphetamine
“Gangsters make a lot of money and wear a lot of gold,” Peter smiled as he said this. “Some gangsters live in big houses or double-storeys. You can buy yourself the latest Nikes or Jordan’s and the best name-brand clothes.”

“Don’t you ever talk shit like that in my house!” I slapped Peter on the back of his head.

David turned to face me.

“Eina!” Peter said, frowning and rubbing his head.

“Don’t listen to your brother,” I said. “Forget about them. You don’t get involved; you stay away from these stupits. You go make something of yourself.”

“My history teacher did tell us that gangsterism did start cause people were angry of forced removals during apartheid,” Peter whispered. Peter liked to challenge me.

David looked at me to confirm this. I wasn’t sure. But I was one of those people taken from my home and put here on the Cape Flats by the apartheid government.

“Ja,” I sighed. “But what can we do now? We are poor and stuck here.”

Another shot fired.

David got a fright and started to cry. Peter rubbed his back.

I told him to forget the sound. Forget about knowing what it is and pretend it’s something else, like a car backfiring or the sound of a loud, powerful firecracker going off. David loved crackers. On Guy Fawkes, I was always scared to buy him klappertjies firecrackers, but he went on about it so much that I gave in. The shots

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51 ouch
stopped for a while. And just when we thought it was over, we would hear another
one and get a fright and nervously laugh it off.

“When mummy, when?” David wanted to know.

“Now, now. I held him tight and started singing, Smile-a-while-and-give-your-
face-”

Another shot. Just outside of our house. Valerie. Shouting hysterically. Her
son Nigel, I thought, he must have been shot. I told the children to stay down and
indoors while I run outside.

“Stay on the ground,” I tried to sound calm. “Peter, hold your brother. Stay in
the house.”

I didn’t know what I would find, but the danger was gone. I walked in on
Nigel’s bloody body lying outside on the pavement – a wound from his neck and
chest streaming with blood. He was on his back choking and crying.

His mother was screaming, “I love you, I love you! Nigel! Oh God! Please
God!” Valerie cried and begged, clutching his body. Her pink nightie was covered in
his blood.

I didn’t know that David was standing behind me, seeing all of this. I felt a
something pulling on my skirt. I turned around. It was David.

“Mummy, is Nigel going to die?” He asked.

I chased him back inside by pushing him away. He was too young to see this.
But he stayed. I bent down beside Valerie, rubbing her back. Nigel had left us. His
eyes were wide open, staring at the night sky. I look at Valerie and her bloody clothes;
it was worse than a butcher’s apron. Even her blue slippers were drenched in blood.
Her hands were dripping with it. The next day I would come over to mop her floors,
put her clothes in a black bag and throw it away. But at that moment, I turned to
David and closed his eyes with my hands. I held him tight, crying with Valerie.
Everybody, it seemed, from the neighbours on either side, Ma Sophie and them, to the
neighbours from the street behind us, everyone was there. Just staring – at the dead
body of this nineteen-year-old, at his mother, at the scene of a crime. Mothers, fathers,
sons and daughters, made a circle around the young man with bloodshot eyes. I
looked around at everyone’s facial expression – pity.

David’s lower lip was shivering; I knew he wanted to cry too, not because he
felt for Nigel, but because he could see how much it affected me.

Valerie coughed out a cry.

An elderly man took off his hat, shook his head
and said: “Not another one.
Not another one.”

Valerie closed Nigel’s eyes.

Then I took David inside and gave him sugar water for the shock.

“Is Nigel dead now, mummy?” he asked with tears in his eyes.

“Yes my baby, he’s dead,” I grabbed him and started crying again, feeling so
heart-
sore for Valerie, and thinking that that could have been my son, but feeling grateful
that it wasn’t.

“Mummy, please don’t leave me, please don’t die like Nigel.”

“I promise you, David, I will never leave you,” I said as I held his face in my
hands.

“What happened to Nigel was a mistake.”
I lied. Nigel was involved with gangs. The gang he belonged to forced you to shoot someone in the head before you could join their ranks. Nigel knew that if you live by the gun, you die by the gun. But my sweet David didn’t need to know the truth. As his mother, I needed to protect him from it. His brother, Peter, had already seen too much. But David was still so innocent; all he ever wanted to do was play. Unlike Peter, he listened to me. David would believe anything I say. My oogappel.52

A few weeks after I watched Nigel’s body go into the ground, I would bury my son.

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I was in the kitchen peeling potatoes for the hot chips and fried fish I was preparing for supper, when David’s older brother, Peter came into the kitchen crying, “Mummy, die trek het oor Dawie. Mummy, Dawie is dood.” I put the knife down, stared at Peter and slapped him across the face. “Peter dis lelik om so iets te sê. You don’t joke about death, Peter, die Here gaan jou straf. Go call your brother. Go call your brother!” I said, with a lump in my throat. Peter shouted at me between sobs, “David is dead! Mummy, hoor mummy, he’s dead!”

Then he told me what happened, the whole story. I sat and listened as I continued to peel the potatoes.

After school on that windy afternoon in August 1993, David and his friends hung onto the back of the truck that brought oranges, milk and bread that the

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52 Apple of my eye
53 the truck went over David
54 David is dead
55 Peter it’s ugly to say something like that
56 the Lord will punish you
57 listen
apartheid government sent to the primary school children. The white truck driver picked up speed. The children hanging on started to panic and jumped off one by one, but David held on, wanting to show off. Then as the truck came to the gravel road, he jumped off, but couldn’t get away. His school pants, torn and ruffled, got caught in the tyre and wrapped around it like a plastic bag. The wheels went over him. The middle wheel, the double wheel, went over his body. Then the rear wheel went over his chest and his head. He was no more.

I got up from the table, and put the very thin sliced potatoes into the hot pan and watched them float in the oil while I spoke to Peter.

“Go call him, Peter.”

“But mummy-“

“Go call David and tell him to come here. I want to see him. Tell him I didn’t make the slap chips so thick. I made the slices nice and thin, just like he likes it. I think he is by his friend Nathan’s house. Run quickly.”

“Mummy please listen to me,” Peter begged.

“Go fetch him,” I said, raising my voice. “Tell him he must come home. Tell him we going to eat now, and he must come home. Tell him I made his favourite. Homemade fish and chips. He will come home if you tell him that. Go fetch him for me Peter. I want to see my baby. Gaan haal my kind.”

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A week later we sat in church. I was wearing a black dress and a veil. I greeted everyone as they walked in. I received lingering hugs, gentle hand-squeezes, and
compassionate words: “Sterkte” whispered into my ear. That’s how they said they felt sorry for me. That’s how I knew my son was dead.

I don’t remember getting dressed that morning, but I remember ironing my clothes and Peter’s clothes and speaking to my sister, Sunita, about cakes, pies and samosas, and ordering orange juice from Mr Harris. Sunita, who had just started her practical at the nursing college, took off from work to help me and made all the arrangements. On a factory worker’s wages, I was worried about how I would pay for the funeral. I didn’t have a funeral policy for my child. He wasn’t supposed to die before me. Sunita said she would make a plan. She got donations from the church group I belong to, Saint Bridgette’s sisters. They offered to each bake 100 fancies, doughnuts and koeksisters. She called the company the truck driver worked for, and after threatening legal action, they agreed to pay for the funeral - for a coffin, flowers for the church and the grave, funeral services and the hiring of the church for the service. They even paid for the gazebo and chairs to be put up at the gravesite. In return, they asked that we don’t take them to court and said: “sorry for your loss”. I told Sunita they could keep their sorry’s. We didn’t anyways have money to pay lawyer’s fees. We chose Heavenly Funeral Services and Undertakers. They always give the posh people nice funerals. Also, their undertaker, Mr Mullins, can play the church organ and they gave us white candles for free. They said the funeral program comes at a separate cost, not covered by their service charge, but that they wouldn’t charge us for printing because David went to school with Mr Mullins’ laaitie boy. In exchange for all of this, they just wanted a plate of food after the service. Then Sunita went to the Anglican Church in Ravensmead to ask Father John to bury him, and she informed all the relatives. All I did was see the body.
My son was blue from the cold. Lying in a freezer at Tygerberg Hospital. I couldn’t believe he was there. His wounds were still fresh. His face was crushed, skull cracked.

“He broke his neck,” said the coroner. “That’s how he died.”

“Oh, I see,” I said and dried my tears.

I left with the burden of loss.

It was a closed coffin. I listened to the squeaky voices singing, Free-fully-free and A-mazing-Grace-how-sweet-the-sound... and humming between sobs. I couldn’t cry. Everyone cried for David, and I felt like I should give him more than just tears. I should be strong for him, and for Peter.

We left the church, and I drove in a hearse to the gravesite. It was the longest ride of my life. I laid him to rest at the cemetery between believers and non-believers, gangsters and teachers, doctors and lawyers, liars and crooks. We are all sinners, but in death, we are all equal.

I looked at the grave, listening to Father John say “ashes to ashes, dust to dust”. I said, “I will miss him very much. He was my baby.” That was the first time I spoke about David like he wasn’t alive anymore.

I covered his mahogany coffin with brown soil and red roses as it went down. I looked around and listened to more singing. More shaking and crying. More down-turned smiles. Tissues and handkerchiefs were taken out to dry the eyes and blow the nose. I offered tissues that I carried tucked away in my bra and handed them to my cousins, sister, and friends. I tried to smile, but I felt my face pull tight. I felt older.
Later when everyone came over to my house for cake and tea, I watched them chatting about the priest’s sermon, David’s beautiful coffin, and my brother Denver’s eulogy,

“David was a good boy. The cleverest in his class at school. He liked to read and his brother was always teasing him about reading so much books. But I said to him, *lees Dawie*, because nobody can take *jou geleerhenteid*, your schooling, away from you. While I was still studying to be a teacher and living with them, David would always ask me questions and want to know what I’m reading and writing all the time. He was inquisitive; he had a real thirst for knowledge, I liked that about him. He told me he wanted to be a teacher like me one day…David also loved playing, always trying to explain to his mother how Cricket is a day And night game. He was good at bowling, always bowling spinners to aim for the wickets. He loved playing outside with his friend’s hide-and-seek or with the soccer ball until late into the night, when his mother must come outside to call him to eat. Sometimes he didn’t even eat and just played on. When he eventually came inside, his mother would give him a hiding. She would say, *as jy nie luister nie moet jy voel*\(^58\). He was naughty at times. But he was only a child. *Ja, jong*, our David. Taken away from us at such a young age. He had so much potential. This is a great loss for our family because it’s the first child to be buried before their parent. But, in our community, it is more common, but it’s usually gang members who we bury before the age of 21. David was an innocent child. Gone too soon. He was a good boy, our *Dawie*. He was a good boy…”

\(^{58}\) If you don’t want to listen, then you must feel
Denver’s eulogy was nice. But none of it mattered to me. Friends and relatives would come over to ask if I’m okay and I remember thinking, what a stupid question, but I had to be nice and say, “I’m okay,” with a frown that was meant to be a smile. I had to be okay even if it was a lie. But at that moment, I didn’t feel anything. It was like my ears had popped the way they do when you drive up a mountain. I fell silent for the rest of the day and listened to distant voices offering condolences and prayers. I nodded my head and made my rounds, working through every room like a machine, making everyone feel better.

By the end of the day, I was tired and hungry. I didn’t feel like eating, but Sunita insisted I have a plate of food. She was moaning about my blood pressure and sugar levels as she put on my kitchen apron.

“I can’t eat, Sunita.”

“Please, Dorothy, you must, you must look after yourself. Peter needs you.”

“I will make some chips.”

“But there’s so much food left over from the funeral.”

“But I like for hot chips. I will make some for myself.”

“No, it’s fine, let me.” She took the oil out of the cupboard.

“I’m not sick or disabled, Sunita, let me do it for myself.” I took the oil from her. I lit a match and ignited the gas camper stove.

“I didn’t see you cry.”

“And?”

“And you don’t have to be strong,” Sunita said. “You lost your child, Dorothy, it’s okay to be sad about it.”

“Sunita asseblief please, just leave it.”
“But I’m just trying—”

“No. Stop it. Dit was ‘n lang dag.\(^{59}\)

Sunita fell silent and left the room a few minutes later. I was cutting the hot chips as thin as a pencil when the knife slipped, and I cut myself. The blood came streaming from my finger. Peter walked in and saw my bleeding hand.

“Don’t worry, Peter, it’s just a small cut,” I said and asked him to get me a plaster.

When he left, I looked down at my hand and cried. I sat down thinking I was going to throw away that bladdy knife and get a better one. A knife that can slice the potatoes stick thin. By the time he came back I was lying on the floor, short of breath.

Peter came over to me and went down on his knees.

“Mummy, only David liked the potatoes like that.”

Then I cried so loud it scared him.

Peter stood over me, crying. Sunita ran in.

“David! David kom huistoe! Come home, my boy, come home.”

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\(^{59}\) It was a long day
Part II

On the page, I practiced restorative justice.

At my fingertips – their lives, their stories – it is bigger than me.

We have to write our own stories.
Mrs Cain

Mrs Cain picks up some dry cleaning for her husband when the shop opens at 9 a.m. She makes a stop at the nursery to buy lavender and an aloe plant which she wants to place at the kitchen window to look at when she is washing the dishes. Then it’s off to Woolworths to buy butter, fruit and bread. The quality at Woolworths is always so much better than at Pick n Pay, she tells herself, and it justifies the extra expense. She walks into the kitchen and puts down the plastic bags. She places the aloe plant in the window-sill and looks out onto the street. Her white neighbour, Mr Van Vuuren, is mowing the lawn while Mrs Van Vuuren works in the garden. Mrs Cain waves and shouts “Good morning!” and Mrs Van Vuuren waves and shouts back “Morning Cheryl!” She looks away, and she sees a strange black car pull up into her driveway. She waits and watches until the person gets out. A pregnant woman, wearing large sunglasses, walks over to their front door.

“Sylvie,” Mrs Cain shouts from the kitchen, “can you get the door please?”

Sylvie, the maid, answers the door. She speaks to the woman for a few minutes. Then she comes into the kitchen.

“Who is she?” Mrs Cain asks.

“She says she only wants to talk to you mem, about a private matter. And she is gonna wait outside until you are ready to see her.”

“What nonsense is that? I have no time to entertain her. Maybe she’s from one of those pyramid schemes and is looking for sympathy with that big belly.”

“Yes,” says Sylvie, looking away, “maybe it’s that, mem.” She leaves the room.
“I can’t waste my time with such things. I have too much to do today. I’m going to make our supper now.” When she’s nervous, Mrs Cain often talks to herself.

Mrs Cain washes and dries her hands before turning on a stove plate. Cooking always relaxes her. She removes a pot from the kitchen cupboard and puts it on the stove, it wobbles. Then she pours in some olive oil and turns her back to the stove. She takes an onion and green pepper from the fridge and a knife and cutting board from the kitchen cupboard. Chops and dices. It goes into the spitting oil. She pours some water into the pot so that it does not burn. Steam rises, the sizzle of the oil reaches its climax. It sounds like falling rain. It fades out. She takes the lamb shanks out of the fridge, removes the packaging and gives them a rinse under the tap with warm water. The blood from the polystyrene packaging washes into the sink, and she watches it and is happy when it is gone. She thumbs and rubs off the loose bits of fat before spicing the red meat with salt and pepper and placing it into the pot. She puts the lid on and takes a break from the stove. She turns on the radio and returns to the stove. She takes off the lid and steam rises. A drop of hot oil spits up from the pan onto her arm. She winces and puts the lid back on. She turns the radio up and writes down a scripture from CCFM. Psalm 55: 22. The pastor she likes is on. Pastor Evans.

“The Bible says the Lord is your saviour. Believe that! Every time you feel the burdens of life are overpowering you, every time you feel that God has deserted you in your hour of need, have faith! Romans chapter 1 verse 16 to 17 proclaims the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes! Amen?”

She nods and says, “Amen”. She hums a hymn while she stirs the pot with the browning lamb. The meat is bubbling, and she spices it with Robertson’s steak and chops spice. She adds the country vegetable mix and stirs the pot; then throws in some
boiling water. A few minutes later, the gravy mix and brown onion soup go in, for
flavour, and to thicken it. Then some Mrs Balls Chutney. A final touch. Spoon down.
She gets up to make herself a cup of tea. Rooibos. Two sugars. She uses the white
porcelain teacup and saucer. She likes her milk hot. She puts it in the microwave for
one minute. It’s still not warm enough, so she puts it in for another minute. She boils
the water twice. The first time for rinsing the cup; the second time for pouring. She
pushes the tea bag left and right against the sides of the cup, squashing and pressing it,
releasing its flavour and antioxidants. She hears the ppppppp of a distant lawn mower.
She must pay the gardening service, she thinks, she will leave the money with Sylvie.

In the past ten years, Sylvie has never taken any money or valuables from the
house. She only takes dishwashing liquid and washing powder and tablespoons.
Maybe Sylvie thinks I don’t notice, Mrs Cain tells herself. Still, she cannot bring
herself to fire Sylvie over this.

Mrs Cain then thinks back to the conversation she had with Garth about it a
few years ago; when they used to sleep in the same room. Garth wanted Mrs Cain to
let Sylvie go.

“No, that would not be right,” said Mrs Cain, “Sylvie is the breadwinner for
her family.”

“Cheryl, if she is stealing from us, that’s not right either,” Garth turned on his
side to face her.

“Of course not. But with all we have, and with the little that she has, we can
afford to lose a few teaspoons or washing powder.”

“But we already give her so much,” Garth said, half-smiling, half-frowning.
“There’s a whole list of things; we paid for her to build a house for her family, we
give her double the pay rate of other full-time domestic workers, we pay for her kids
school fees, she is free to take any food from the house that she wants, you even pick
her up and drop her off for work. Most people never treat their domestics this well.”

“But she’s also my friend,” Mrs Cain fought back the tears. “She deserves
better than the life she has.”

“You have such a kind and generous heart, Cheryl Cain,” Garth said and
smiled as he touched her cheek. “That’s why I married you,” he reached over and
kissed her.

“You are the generous one,” she kissed him back and smiled. “You pay for it
all. I remember what it’s like to have very little. I’m just trying to give back the
blessings I receive.”

Garth put his hand on her hip as they lay in bed facing each other.

“What are you doing Garth, don’t be silly,” Mrs Cain laughed and gently
pushed his hand off her hip.

“Cheryl, I’ve been away for months,” he frowned as he said this.

“I thought we were discussing this Sylvie matter?”

“I’m showing you that I miss my wife.”

“Oh, that,” said Mrs Cain, rolling her eyes. “You know I’m going through
menopause right now. How can you be so insensitive?”

“Fine,” he said and turned his back to her. “Of course only you think that
because you’ve lost your libido that men of my age don’t have needs.”

They were lying still for a few minutes and then Mrs Cain put her hand on his
hip. “We could try,” she said, “If that will please you.”
Garth got up and said, “I’m going to make a phone call” and left the room. When he returned from his next work trip, he slept in the guest room.

Mrs Cain remembers that conversation. She removes the tea-bag with a spoon and throws it into the silver pot where she keeps the other old, used tea-bags as firelighters. A tip from the November 2014 issue of *Good Housekeeping* magazine. Then she pours in the hot milk. The cup is warm around the edges. Steam escapes. She takes a sip, careful not to burn her tongue. “Ahh, that’s lovely,” she says before paging through the *Good Housekeeping* and *Women and Home* magazines. She cuts out recipes and puts them in her makeshift recipe book, a flip file she keeps in the kitchen. She opens the travel section of the *Sunday Times* and reads an article about a travel writer’s quest to find the best Italian dishes in Italy. She remembers the trip they took to Italy and France for their thirtieth anniversary. They dined out, they danced, and then they made love. Garth is such a great dancer, she thinks, and he gets even more attractive as he crosses over into his sixties. She smiles and thinks about the day they met.

She was walking down the street in Bo-Kaap with a friend, and he walked passed them. Then he ran back and stopped her. He went down on one knee and kissed her hand. She thought he was silly for doing that. Everyone was staring at them. Then he said, “Marry me, beautiful lady,” and she laughed and walked away. The next day he was standing on the corner of the street in a grey suit with three yellow roses in his hand. She was wearing her factory overalls. He asked her again to marry him.

“No,” she said and laughed, shaking her head and covering her face with her hand.
“One of these days you’ll be Mrs Cain,” he said, “we’ll have two children, and we’ll live in the suburbs. I will give you a good life,” he smiled and exposed a gap between his teeth.

Cheryl laughed and thought it was the cutest thing in the world. It melted her heart. That’s when she said yes; and agreed to go out on a date with him. They got married a few months later.

Their thirty-seventh wedding anniversary is coming up soon. Mrs Cain is planning something special this year. Garth has suggested that they go to Mauritius for a week. She has gone to Sure Travel for a quote on their flights and accommodation. She wants to go away with him. He is always travelling alone for work. She is used to him being away from home and for long periods of time, but she feels it is time that they reconnect. She wonders if there have been other women. She swallows her tea.

Mrs Cain gets to dusting above the top cupboards and between the venetian blinds. She finds an old 2 cent coin. Wonders how it got there. She remembers how much she could buy with a 2 cent coin when she was a little girl. She felt rich! So many chips and sweets and chocolates. She goes back to dusting. Cleanliness is close to godliness or something like that, she thinks. She makes a mental note not to forget to make an appointment to see her Dr Thomas, her gyne.

It’s been six months since her last check-up. Garth has been so busy and away for such a long time that she hasn’t gotten a chance to tell him yet. She doesn’t want to give him the news over the phone. She doesn’t like getting bad news over the phone. To her, it always seemed harsher and colder. She would tell Garth the moment he gets back from his Joburg business trip. She makes a note of the appointment and
puts it on the fridge door. She stares at it and wonders how Garth will take the news. Her mother died of cervical cancer. She wonders if her illness will help to bring them closer. “In sickness and in health,” she says out loud and hears a knock on the door. It interrupts her.

She is not dressed for visitors. She walks over to the front door, hesitates, but opens it. The young woman before her is tall, with blue eyes and sleek brown hair wrapped around her like a cape. She looks posh, thinks Mrs Cain, dressed in cashmere and linen. The ballooning baby bump stretches the fabric of her red top.

“Hello, I’m looking for Cheryl Cain.”

“That’s me. What can I do for you dear?”

“I knocked earlier and spoke to your domestic.”

“Her name’s Sylvie. What’s this about?”

“Okay, sorry. I’m not sure how to say this but, can I come inside? I have something I need to tell you in private.”

“Are you Michael’s friend?” says Mrs Cain, glancing at the baby bump.

“No, who’s Michael?”

“Michael’s my son,” she says and breathes a sigh of relief.

“Oh. No, I’m actually...I’m a friend of your husband,” she says squeezing her handbag.

Mrs Van Vuuren, her neighbour, moves closer to the Cain residence, onto the edge of her lawn, to hose her garden plants. She smiles at Mrs Cain and the woman standing at her door.

“You’ve got the wrong house, dear,” says Mrs Cain, grabbing the door handle.
“He said you two were separated. That you still live together for the sake of the children, but that you sleep in separate bedrooms.”

Mrs Cain clenches the door handle. No one knows that. How else would she know that if Garth didn’t tell her? She drifts back into the conversation.

“I’ve been seeing him for over a year. We work together. I’m from Joburg.”

“You must be mistaken,” Mrs Cain says with a nervous laugh.

“He hasn’t been honest with you,” she says and gives Mrs Cain a pitying look.

“You’re lying. My husband is a good man. Please go,” she says and pushes the door to close it. Her heart is pounding and ringing in her ears.

The young woman stops the door with her hand.

“I’ll be parked outside. The black Audi A4. That’s a new gift from Garth. Call me when you’re ready to talk.”

“Please remove your car from my driveway,” she tries to keep her voice calm.

“I’ll be leaving soon, and my son will be arriving home soon.”

“Fine. I’ll park nearby. I’m not leaving until we get to talk things out.”

Mrs Cain shuts the door. She feels dizzy. My husband is a good man, she thinks, my husband is a family man. She leans on to the antique dresser for support.

Sylvie walks into the entrance room.

“What did she say, mem?” she asks holding the pink feather duster.

“Mind your business Sylvie,” Mrs Cain rubs her temples, she feels a migraine coming on.

“Sorry mem,” says Sylvie, taken aback. Mrs Cain has never spoken to her like this before. She’s always telling Sylvie her business. Sylvie walks out of the entrance room into the kitchen to fetch the vacuum cleaner. On her way over, she peeks
through the blinds and sees the strange car in the driveway with the young woman sitting in it.

“Ngxaki”\textsuperscript{60},” Sylvie says, walking away smiling and shaking her head.

Mrs Cain looks at the grandfather clock opposite the front door. It's noon.

“Sylvie! Sylvie!” she shrieks. Sylvie walks in to ask if she should mop downstairs as well.

“Not today, Sylvie, I’ll do it. How about you start on the windows, and I’ll mop. Have you vacuumed the upstairs and downstairs?”

“I was about to do that mem,” Sylvie replies and sucks her teeth.

“Okay, then start with the outside windows, please.”

“But you said I must vacuum first mem,” she says, frowning.

“Sylvie, pay attention. Windows first, then vacuuming. Okay?” Mrs Cain purses her lips.

Sylvie puts the vacuum down and walks back to get the Windolene, shammy cloth and newspaper out of the kitchen cupboard.

“There is no time to waste, Sylvie,” Mrs Cain raises her voice, “I have so much to do today! I need to visit my friend, Mildred in Stellenbosch. Then I must drive fifty minutes to go and pick up Nicole from campus in Cape Town CBD. Then we’ll sit in traffic for another hour to get back home. Then I need to –“

\textsuperscript{60}“Trouble” or directly translated as, “Problem” in isiXhosa
“Okay, mem, says Sylvie, shifting her weight from side to side, “I understand.” Sylvie stands and smiles at Mrs Cain who is still standing in the entrance way.

“Do you think Mildred will like the yellow roses? They always help to cheer me up when I’m feeling down. Do you know what happened to poor Mildred?”

“No, what happened?” Sylvie walks over to the window closest to where Mrs Cain is standing.

“My friend Mildred went through a terrible divorce from her husband. Can you believe he cheated on her with a woman half his age?”

“Shame,” Sylvie says shaking her head.

“At our age, after thirty-seven years of marriage? It’s not right,” Mrs Cain’s voice cracks.

“Mem, but you’re only fifty-seven, that’s not so old. Lots of husbands cheat on their wives, young or old. Women are strong, we survive.”

“No, not me. I’m talking about Mildred,” she says and clears her throat.

“Yes, mem,” says Sylvie as she uses the newspaper to make the windows shine.

“You know, Sylvie, I am so blessed that I have a good husband like Garth. We have a good marriage,” she says and folds the sides of a tissue until it resembles a samoosa. “Most of my friends are divorced now.”

“They’re white, mem. These white people will divorce, quick-quick. Us black people and you coloured people, we don’t just get divorced, unless he beats you too much. Otherwise, we stay or live separate lives.”
“Well,” says Mrs Cain and looks up from the folded tissue to see Sylvie cleaning the front windows. “Okay Sylvie, I must go now, will you manage?”

“Yes, mem.”

“Okay, I’ll be inside if you need me. I’m going to leave soon to visit Mildred.”

“Okay, mem.”

Mrs Cain peeps through the venetian blinds to see the black car parked on the opposite side of the road. The woman is parked in front of nosy Mrs Jeffreys house. What if Mrs Jeffreys comes out to ask why she’s parked there? She thinks and turns around to gather the newspapers and magazines on the kitchen table and puts them into a neat pile. Mrs Cain places the duster back into the cupboard. She gets a water bucket from the backyard and the mop and fills it with hot water and cleaning product. She watches through the cracks of the blinds as the postman drops off the local newspaper, the TygerBurger. Mrs Cain forces herself to go outside to get the newspaper from the post-box. She hates seeing it sit out and get wet or bird poop on it. She avoids looking in the direction of the black Volkswagen. She greets her neighbour Mr. van Vuuren, who is also collecting his Tygerburger. She wonders if he notices the car and the woman in it. Mrs Van Vuuren has seen them talking. She wonders if she could she have overheard their conversation. Mrs Cain crumbles up the newspaper. What if the neighbours start asking questions, she thinks, but she will just say this woman is mad. Her husband, Garth, is a good man. He may not be around much, they may have their problems, but she still loves him and trusts him. He provides for his family, she thinks, he is a good man. Then she wonders if there could be any truth to what this woman is saying? Mrs Cain stares at the ceiling. It needs a coat of paint, and she thinks Garth can do it and that it’s time he did some work
around the house. She, Cheryl Cain, has been a good wife. A faithful wife. She cannot understand why sex would be more important to him than the sacred bond of marriage? Just yesterday, she remembers, Pastor Evans was talking about this on Radio Tygerberg. She wonders if they could go and see Pastor Evans for marriage counselling. Mrs Cain decides that this woman is just making up stories.

The telephone rings. It startles her. “Sylvie! Can you please answer the phone?” Sylvia rushes in and sees Mrs Cain standing by the telephone.

“Must I pick it up?” says Sylvie.

“Yes, now. Quickly,” says Mrs Cain and then walks upstairs to her bedroom to get her cell phone.

Sylvie answers it. It’s Garth.

“Hi Cheryl, it’s me, listen, I can’t talk long. I’m still in Joburg. Won’t make it home this eve. Might still be tied up here for a while. I’ll keep you posted.”

“Okay, sir, I’ll tell her.”

“Oh, Sylvie, why are you answering the phone? Where’s Mrs Cain?”

“She went upstairs Mr Cain; she’s coming back down now. I can tell her to hold for you?”

“No, actually, just give her the message. I’ve got to go. Cheers.”

Sylvie puts down the phone. Mrs Cain always says she must never answer the phone.

“Thanks, Sylvie,” says Mrs Cain as she walks back down the stairs, “Who was it?”

“It was Mr Cain.”

“Oh, he must be on his way home,” she smiles, “did he leave a message?”
“Yes, mem, he said he can’t come home because –“

“Thanks, Sylvie,” her smile fades. “I’ll call him back. I’ll take my call upstairs.”

Sylvie says, “I’m sorry, mem” and goes over to hug Mrs Cain. After a few moments, she pulls away.

“It’s okay, Sylvie,” Mrs Cain forces a smile, “there’s nothing you can do about it. But thanks, anyway.” She grips her phone tighter; then makes her way back upstairs and into her bedroom.

Mrs Cain looks down at her hands and stares at her cell phone for a few seconds. She contemplates whether she should call him; and whether she should confront him about this woman’s allegations? Mrs Cain is disappointed that she will not get a chance to tell him about her diagnosis. But she cannot wait any longer. She wonders if there have been other women too, in the past. She squashes the thought. Her phone beeps and startles her. It’s a message from Garth.

Can’t make it home today. So sorry. Will make it up to you. Send my love to Michael and Nicole.

She looks down to the floor and remembers the mop and water waiting for her downstairs. She rushes back down. The kitchen clock says it’s 2 p.m. “Oh, gosh!” she shouts. She has to pick up Nicole from campus at 3 p.m. She’s going to be late. “The house is still such a mess,” she says out loud. She takes another peek through the blinds. “That damn car is still there,” she mumbles. She watches as Mrs Jeffreys walks towards the car. Suddenly, she feels hot and dizzy. What will this woman say to Mrs Jeffrey’s? She knows her husband is a good man. Mrs Cain furiously mops the
tiled areas of the house until it is spotless. Her mother always taught her; you must be able to eat from the floor, that’s how clean it should be.

She goes upstairs to get dressed. She combs her short, brown hair with her fingers. She spots a few grey hairs and thinks it is time to dye her hair again. She puts on her lipstick, rose pink. It will match her pink cardigan. A spritz of *Elizabeth Arden* Green Tea. She sits on the bed to put on her denim skirt and pantyhose with her black ankle boots. She looks at the clock. It’s 2:30 p.m. She has to leave now. She rushes downstairs and into the kitchen for some juice. She opens the fridge and takes out the orange juice. She sees the note on the fridge: make the gyne appointment. She has almost forgotten. She has Dr Carol’s office number saved on her phone. She dials and cannot get through. The number is busy.

“Dammit!” She calls out, “Sylvie!”

“Mem,” Sylvie replies then walks in.

“I should be back around 6 p.m. Please try and finish up by the time I get home.”

“Oh, okay, mem.”

“If Michael gets home before we do, tell him there is food on the stove, but he must wait for suppertime. When Mr Cain gets home –

“But he said on the phone he’s not coming,” says Sylvie.

“Oh, yes. Sorry, I forgot,” she says as she fiddles with her wedding band.

“Mem, are you okay mem?”

“Yes. I’m fine,” she takes Sylvia’s hand in hers and squeezes it. “I also made some
tuna sandwiches for lunch this morning. They’re in the fridge.”

“Okay, mem, I’ll tell them, mem.”

Sylvie walks away and goes outside to finish the window cleaning. “Thank you, Sylvie!” she shouts. “What would I do without you?”

She looks at her watch, 2:45 p.m. “Nicole gets very upset if she has to wait for me.” She stares at her wedding band. She thinks, what happens now? She walks over to kitchen sink window overlooking the street. Mrs Jeffreys is still talking to this woman.

She calls Garth and then hangs up when it goes to voicemail. She wonders what this woman is saying to Mrs Jeffreys? She decides it is up to her husband to clear up this mess. Her phone beeps on the kitchen counter. She picks it up. It’s a message from Garth:

Can’t talk now. Busy at work. Will call you later.

Mrs Cain reads his message and shouts, “liar!” and throws her phone against the wall. The screen cracks. It was a birthday gift from Garth last month. She looks at it and thinks about all the gifts she’s gotten from him over the years and how many times he has missed her birthday or the children’s birthdays. She thinks back to the time when her mother was ill and how he missed the funeral because he was away on a work trip. She decides to call him and leaves a voicemail message.

“Your mistress has ousted you. She came to our house, where our children live. I’m sure all the neighbours must know what’s going on by now. Fathering a child at your age is shameful. You’re a disgrace to this family. Oh, and I’ve been diagnosed with –“
She gets cut off, and the message is recorded. She picks up her handbag and throws her phone inside and takes out her car keys.

Mrs Cain makes her way over to the garage. As she starts the car, she remembers the flowers for Mildred. “Oh gosh! I almost forgot.” She switches off the ignition and runs into the house to get the yellow roses and the vase she bought for Mildred. Mildred loves lilies. But this will do. Anything to help soothe the pain of her loss. She pours out the fresh water and wraps the vase with the flowers in pink and white tissue paper. As she walks back to the car, she takes a final look through the blinds. No sign of Mrs Jeffrey’s. The car has disappeared. She wishes they would all disappear. She clutches her car keys. Tighter.

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Karen was idling at the robot traffic light on Okavango Bridge. Sweat trickled down her back and neck. She shifted around in her seat, removed her Clinique cosmetics white lab coat and used the Consultant Training sign-in sheet to fan herself. CeeLo Green’s latest summer hit, ‘Forget You’ was blaring on the radio. She turned the volume down and surveyed her surroundings – shopping complexes to her left and fast food restaurants to her right. The aroma of salty, McDonalds french fries and KFC fried chicken drifted through the air. That is when she noticed the little boy for the first time. He was standing by the side of the road with a group of older boys, twice his size, probably around ten or eleven-years-old. He was the only coloured child among this group of black children. She was drawn to him, thinking that that could have been her child. He was dwarf-sized and wore tattered clothes a few sizes too big. She wondered how old he was and whether malnutrition had stunted his growth. She was repulsed by his snot-nose, but had the urge to clean it. She thought about taking him home with her, washing him, and dressing him in clean clothes. She wondered where his parents were and how he ended up living on the streets. She waved to call him over. Her window was down.

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She looked into the little boy’s eyes. Grey. It was so rare and striking. It was even more contrasting against his brown skin. She thought of taking him home.

“Hello, unty, I askin’ for food,” said the little brown boy.

“Sorry, I don’t have any food,” said Karen and searched for the packet of sweets she had bought the day before. Usually, she would not give a begging child
one morsel because once anyone gave them food or money, they expected hand-outs all the time.

But there was something about this boy.

“Unty, don’t unty have a R2 for me, asseblief⁶¹, unty,” said the boy in tattered clothes. Karen was staring at him. After a moment, he whispered, “My name is Lenny.”

Karen wanted him to be hers. She grabbed the strawberry Fizzers from the back seat and gave one to the child. His eyes lit up, “Dankie tank you, unty” he said and grabbed the sweet out of her hand. His hand grazed hers. She smiled back. He rushed over to the other children standing on the pavement. She watched him chew with an open mouth as he showed them the wrapper. She heard a car hooting behind her and looked up. The robot was green, and there was a ten-metre gap between her and the car in front. She pulled forward and the robot started to change to amber, then red. The man behind her in a white Volkswagen Citi Golf hooted several times. He was talking on his cell phone, and she stayed out of sight of her rear-view mirror to avoid his glare. The boy and his group of friends walked over to her car. Lenny led the pack. Seeing them move towards her; she tried to turn up her window. Karen grabbed the handle and turned it in a circular motion twice before it jammed. She managed to move it up by a few centimetres when Lenny’s face appeared at her door and his short, stout fingers arched over her window. Karen frowned as she stared at his unwashed hands. She looked at his beak-like, black fingernails and thought of all the dirt underneath. She fantasised about washing his hands - seeing them clean, nails trimmed and scented with soap.

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⁶¹ please
The car behind her hooted again. The robot was about to turn red for the second time.

She was already late for work. She drove off.

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Karen worked in the cosmetics department as a Clinique Consultant. She was stationed between the moody Sensei consultant, Marelize; and the fanatical Estēe Lauder consultant, Sunette.

Karen prided herself on cleanliness. Her white lab coat was always bleached clean. Her hair washed and combed back; rich brown locks with blonde highlights that draped over her shoulders. Her honey-comb foundation, red lipstick, and dark, thick eyelashes turned heads. She loved the attention.

She loved her job but hated having to do facials because it got messy and she would have to touch people’s faces and sometimes they had acne which she thought was gross. She also hated doing makeovers in her coat, because they would get makeup smudged on it, sometimes stains. She would soak and scrub those stains out by hand until her palms were red and swollen.

After having worked for Clinique for ten years as a junior consultant, she was finally promoted to a senior consultant position. As part of the promotion, she was able to hire two flexi-time consultants to work with her, she received a second white lab coat, and she got to train new consultants. She taught them facts about the bone structure and the dermatology of skin care – using a ‘layers of skin epidermis diagram’. She showed them how to use the Skin Care Diagnostic Tool. She went over the Clinique 3-Step Skincare system for each skin type. She gave her expert advice on
how your T-zone and complexion affect your makeup choices, and how to layer your makeup. Her favourite part was telling them how to take it all off and clean your skin – from the cleansing makeup removal stage to the SPF moisturiser stage. She ended the training session by displaying her makeup skills. She used gloves and carefully painted on the makeup, everyone watched over her shoulder and gasped at the moment of reveal – beauty!

The raise she got from training last month was not as much as she had expected. Her dream of buying real leather couches would remain just that, a dream. At first, when she got news of the promotion, she cut out images of all the furniture she wanted to purchase with her increase as pictured in the Home Owner’s magazine.

Later, she splurged on Ray Ban Polarized Sunglasses. Even with the increase in her salary, the sunglasses were way out of her budget. She decided to treat herself to it as a reward. She felt entitled to it after her ten years as a junior consultant. One of her new flexi-time consultants told her the sunglasses were “so trendy”. At first, she smiled and felt ‘in’ with her new colleagues, but then later she felt silly for seeking the approval of an eighteen-year-old.

All the junior consultants were young girls fresh out of high school. They were eighteen and nineteen, and she was twenty-nine. They didn’t have to wear much makeup to look flawless. They were all studying at university or college – Education, Neuroscience, Chemical Engineering, and Social work. She wanted to study too but was forced to work to support herself. Every time she worked with them, they talked about their classes and assignments. She listened to their stories, laughed along, but had no story of her own. Then she walked away and went over to talk to the senior consultants. Sunette was excitedly discussing her next facial appointment. Marelize
was sharing details about her upcoming silver wedding anniversary. Karen pretended to be interested and smiled, but the mention of “wedding” made her daydream about her lost opportunity with her ex-boyfriend who was now engaged to someone else. She had recently deleted her wedding board from her Pinterest account, but wedding dresses or flowers or cakes still came up on her home feed. She walked back to her station and took her feather duster out of her station draw. Dusting made her feel better. That’s why her station was always in an impeccable condition. At their end-of-year function, she would get a staff award for “cleanest station in cosmetics department”. She used to keep them on display to show off to friends or customers, now they sat in her draw and collected dust.

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The next day, she tried to avoid their stares. Now that she had given Lenny something, the others expected something from her too. She didn’t want to be harassed by the street children for food or money. That is why she usually kept her windows rolled up and stared straight ahead to avoid eye contact with any of them. She was in luck this time because the robot was green and she drove past the little boy as he waved wildly from the pavement. She stared at him in her rear view mirror. All through that day, his face ghosted her.

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Later, when she came home from work, she took a warm bath. She sat in the soap-scum water until it cooled down. She thought about the boy. Then she thought about the other children. He was playing with them and sharing food. She needed to take him away from them. He would be safer and more comfortable with her, she thought as she stepped out of the bath.
Two days later, when she drove up to the robot, Lenny came over and tapped on her window. She struggled to get her window rolled down, and his first words to her were, “Hello, unty, does unty have more sweets for me?” He reeked of urine. His brown face and hands covered in soot. He had a layer of black dirt on his cheek. Mustard-coloured mucus escaped from his nose and slid down onto his upper lip. He licked it with his tongue. “Ha-ah!” she shouted, her face scrunched up. He giggled and ran back to his friends. She parked the car onto the side of the road and got out. She took a packet of Kleenex tissues out of her coat pocket. She waved them in the air and called him over, but he did not budge. “More sweets!” he shouted. She called over one of the older boys and asked him to bring Lenny to her. “Lossie kind af” he snapped at her, shooing her away. She threw the tissues onto the passenger seat and sped off.

When she was five-years-old, Karen played dress up and put on her mother’s lipstick. Her mother walked in and found her at the dressing table.

“Look at me, mommy!” Karen said, smiling with red lipstick on her teeth and all over her mouth.

“You’ve dirtied your face,” her mother said, “and look at those stains on your dress!”

Karen looked down at the lipstick stains on her yellow dress. Her mother grabbed her by the hand and took her to the bathroom. She peeled off her dress and

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62 Leave the child alone
put it in the laundry basket. Then she grabbed some tissues and her makeup remover from the medicine cabinet and carefully cleaned Karen’s face. As she wiped off the lipstick, she said to her daughter:

“To be beautiful is to be clean.”

Karen looked into her mother’s brown eyes as she said this. She never forgot those words.

Her mother was a Clinique Consultant too. In the morning and the evening, Karen watched as her mother performed her skincare ritual, using Clinique’s 3-Step-System. She started by cleaning her face with the facial soap, then explained to Karen that the next step was to exfoliate the dead skin cells with clarifying lotion, and finally, to hydrate and balance the skin with moisturiser. When Karen watched her mother, it was as if it were happening in slow motion.

Her mother said she loved Clinique because unlike the other makeup brands, it focused on maintaining a “clean and clear look”. Her mother took her along to work one day, and Karen watched her charm every client that sat in her chair. Karen was in awe of her mother. All her clients seemed to love her. Everywhere they went her mother was recognised and thanked for her service. Karen wanted to be just like her.

Before her mother died – from kidney failure six months before Karen completed her schooling – Karen asked her if she could study medicine and become a skin doctor instead of a Clinique Consultant.

“Where did you get that idea from?” Her mother said as she completed her skincare ritual.

“Well, my boyfriend suggested –
“I’m your mother. I know what’s best for you.” Her mother took her by the shoulders and walked her over to the dressing table.

Karen sat down on the chair. She had a whole speech planned. She felt wounded by her mother’s sharp response.

As they both looked at each other in the mirror, her mother smiled and continued.

“Look at how beautiful you are. That clean and clear skin. It’s perfect for the Clinique brand. If you start now, you could go so far in the company.”

“But I think I really want to be a skin doctor,” Karen said as she tried to swallow the lump in her throat.

“Being a Clinique Consultant is almost like being a skin doctor. Clinique’s approach to skincare is clinical. But you’ll get to have more fun in this job, and I know how much you love to wear makeup.”

Karen smiled as she contemplated her mother’s reassuring words.

“Think about it, my dear, you get to wear the white lab coat. You have consultations with your ‘patients’ slash clients. You get to diagnose their skin care problems using the Skin Care Diagnostic tool. Then you get to recommend a treatment, starting with the 3-Step skincare kit and you take it from there.” Her mother rubbed her arms and walked away.

After her mother died, Karen completed her schooling and applied for a job in cosmetics. She went for training to become a Clinique Consultant. The trainer knew her mother well and became Karen’s mentor. Karen graduated from the training school at the top of her class.
The white lab coat always made her feel like a skin doctor. She was an expert. She knew all the Clinique did-you-know facts and memorised the Consultant’s manual.

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A week passed before Karen saw Lenny again. As she idled at the robot, the boy ran over to her car.

“Hello,” she said, grinning. “I’m sorry if I scared you off the other day.”

A moment of silence passed between them. Karen took the time to inspect him. The soot was gone. His grey tracksuit pants and amber vest were blackened. He must have cleaned his face and hands with it, she thought.

“Are you upset with me?” Karen asked.

“Yes,” he responded with pouting lips.

“Lenny, my name is Aunty Karen.” She took another glance at his nails and almost reached for the nail-clipper she had purchased especially for him.

“More sweets? Asseblief, Aunty Karen.”

“I gave you a whole packet a week ago!” she said in a high-pitched voice.

“No, I don’t have anymore. It’s not good to eat so many sweets. Your teeth will get rotten,” she said as she stared into his mouth and spotted a few black teeth.

“What do you have to eat?” she asked.

“Brown bread and jam. Muneeb,” he said, pointing at one of the older boys standing
on the traffic island. “He got from da lady by da shop.”

“Where’s your mommy and daddy?”

“I don’t know,” he said, facing the ground.

Karen looked up and saw that the robot was green. She needed to know more about Lenny. She drove forward and asked him to follow her car. Then she stopped on the shoulder of the road at the opposite side of the intersection. Lenny ran over to her car. She parked and got out from behind the driver’s seat.

“How are those boys you stand with at the robot?” she asked as she folded her arms and leaned against the car door.

“Dey my fends,” Lenny said with a smile and turned to look in their direction.

“What car this is?” Lenny asked.

“A Toyota Runx,” Karen said then asked, “Where are you staying? Where do you sleep at night?” She picked up her handbag and removed a small plastic bag, a packet of Huggies wet wipes, hand sanitizer, and set of cream latex gloves.

“There!” he pointed to the bridge. “Under da road,” he said with glee.

“Do you have any brothers or sisters?” she stretched the gloves over her hands and reached out to grab his hand.

He stepped back and said: “No.”

“Come here,” she said and smiled reassuringly.

“Why you put on that?” Lenny asked.
“Let me clean your hands so I can give you nice food to eat,” Karen gently took hold of his left hand and squirted sanitizer into his palm. She told him to rub his hands together.

He giggled because it was cold and wet and then disappeared.

“Good boy,” she smiled looking down at him. After having used several wet wipes, she cleaned his hands until they looked good enough to eat with. Then she took off her gloves and threw them into the small plastic bag along with the wipes. Then she sanitised her hands as well.

He watched her do this and laughed.

She smiled and showed him her palms. “See, clean,” she said. She opened the back door and took out her lunch bag. In it, she had plastic wrapped a cheese and ham sandwich. She gave it to him.

“Yoh! Dankie⁶³ Aunty Karen.”

“It’s my pleasure. You enjoy it.”

She watched him push both slices into his tiny mouth and chew. His cheeks were bloated with chunks of bread. Saliva and small pieces of ham escaped from the corners of his mouth. She listened to him chew like a dripping tap.

The following day, they talked again. This time, she brought two sandwiches, and they sat and ate together at the side of the road. His friends stood over them like vultures. She shooed them away like flies. She took the wet wipes out of her handbag and cleaned his hands before and after he ate. She could not get them clean enough but thought that later, when she got him to her house, she would be able to clean him with warm water and soap.

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⁶³ Whoa, thank you
“When was the last time you bathed?” Karen asked him as she pinched her nose and stared at his hair that looked like *droëwors*\(^\text{64}\).

“When it rain all days.” He licked the mayo off the chicken sandwich.

“In the winter?”

“Ja,” Lenny said and poked the cold chicken with his index finger.

“Do you need me to make the chicken fine for you?” Karen said, “It hurts to chew?”

She took his piece of chicken from his bread. He moaned.

“Don’t worry,” she said and smiled. “You’ll get it back. Let me help you.” She put the chicken into her mouth and chewed it fine for him.

He watched her chew and started to cry.

“Don’t cry,” Karen said and put some in his mouth so he could swallow it.

He spat it out into the palm of his hand.

“It’s OK,” she said, “you can eat from my hands and mouth, they’re clean” and motioned for him to eat it.

That night, Karen tossed and turned as she thought about Lenny and how he had not taken a bath since June. She thought about how he had slept under a bridge in the cold and wet while she was warm in her bed.

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The following morning, she prepared toast and pork sausages for Lenny for breakfast, but she couldn’t find him. She waited a few minutes on the side of the road before she drove off again.

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\(^{64}\) A traditional South African dried spiced sausage made from Beef, Lamb, coriander and other spices.
She had a two-hour consultant training session that started at 8 a.m. She was thirty minutes late for training and then got stuck in traffic on Durban road because of roadwork on the N1 highway.

When she got to Clinique’s head office in Century City, just after 9 a.m., the young girls were chatting and laughing outside the conference room. Marelize and Sunette stood by the door with arms crossed, and as she approached, they tapped their wristwatches. Karen had forgotten that she had invited them to do demonstrations that day. She quickly opened the door, and everyone funnelled into the room. Karen sent around a sign in sheet and apologised for the delay. She then called Marelize and Sunette over to introduce themselves and to get started on their demonstrations, which gave her a moment to gather herself. Marelize was tight-lipped. Sunette stepped forward and began her demonstration. She gave the trainee Consultants tips on the five secrets to a perfect red lip.

“Estēe Lauder’s approach is all about sculpting lipstick that gives you a sophisticated look but with lustrous colour and brilliant shine. While Clinique’s approach is more about the lip condition, using a scrub to slough away dry flakes of skin, and following with balm or moisturiser. Both approaches are correct in creating the perfect canvas for the perfect red lip! I’ll show you how to achieve this. Any volunteers?”

Later, after Marelize and Sunette had completed their demonstrations and had left, Karen finished her training session for the day. All through the day she thought about Lenny. She missed him. Where had he been earlier? He was usually waiting for her on the side of the road, ready to eat his sandwich. He had been asking for more sweets.
Then she went shopping just down the road at Canal Walk mall.

First, she went to Pick n Pay grocer to buy the toiletries she would need for Lenny’s bath. She picked up the bubble bath and wondered which one would Lenny like? She decided to buy the Barney bubble bath. She wondered whether he would know about the purple dinosaur and whether he had ever seen the show before, or even a TV screen. Then she went from aisle to aisle and selected the other products – liquid soap, loofah, baby lotion, olive oil, lice comb, and lavender baby powder. For herself, she would only need coverage – a full-length plastic poncho, shower cap, and crocs, the ones without the air holes. Then she walked into the clothing section and selected a baby hooded towel and washcloth for him. She also picked out a pair of pyjamas and a new outfit for the next day. She didn’t know which Disney character he might like, and decided she liked the bold red of the Spiderman character, so she picked a t-shirt and shorts. She wanted to buy him a pair of shoes, probably his first but hesitated because she didn’t know his shoe size. She held the children’s shoes 3 – 4 and 5 – 6 in her hands and decided to put it back. She would need to bring him along for a fitting the next time. She paid for the items and drove home.

Once she got home, she walked to the bathroom cabinet and put the plastic bag with the products, as well as the towel and washcloth inside it. Then she put the other bag with his clothes in her bedroom cupboard. She took out all her old curtains and sheets and covered the floors and furniture with it. She put old bedding on her bed. Then fell asleep.

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The next morning, when she gave Lenny his sandwich, she asked him to come home with her.
“I was looking for you yesterday,” Karen said, smiling as she watched him eat.

“I was wit my fends. We stan by another wobot. Dey say you only give to me and dey awso want.”

“But you are my special boy,” Karen said, “I share with you because I love you.”

“You wan be my mommy?”

“Yes, if you want that.”

The boy smiled and turned to look at his friends.

“You wan be their mommy awso?”

“So you want to come home with me?” Karen asked, “I will make you something nice to eat. I bought you some new clothes; I’ll wash you, so you smell nice and clean, and you can sleep in a bed with blankets and pillows. How does that sound?” she said, enthusiastically.

He was quiet for a moment as he looked around and then he looked at her and shouted out, “Nice!”

She told him to wait for her at the robot and that she would pick him up on her way home. He smiled and jumped and skipped back to his friends. She picked him up just after 8 p.m. The other boys saw her drive away with him and ran after the car. After a while, they got tired and stopped. She was glad to lose them. She lived just ten minutes away from the intersection.

She pulled up into her driveway and parked in the garage. She switched off the car and turned around to face Lenny. He was sitting in the back seat tied with the seatbelt.
“Bath time!” she said, smiling wide.

The little boy shook his head and shouted, “No!”

“You probably want to eat first,” she smiled, “okay, wait here for a few minutes.” She got out, and Lenny watched her switch on the light before she left the garage.

While he sat in the car, he tried to unbuckle himself. He could not press with enough force to release the clip. He would need her help. He touched the blanket she had placed over the back seat. He wondered if she would keep him here.

Karen came back holding a bowl in her hands. “Here’s your pasta and chicken from the deli. I could heat it up and bring it to the car for you to eat. Or...you could be a good boy for Aunty Karen, and take off your clothes so you can leave it in the garage. Then you can come inside and eat while you watch TV. Would you like that?”

Lenny sulked for a few minutes and then nodded his head and said, “TV”.

Karen unbuckled him and helped him out of the car. While he took off his clothes, she reached into the cubbyhole and put on a pair of cream surgical gloves. Once he had undressed, she took him by the hand. They walked into the house and looked around. He stared at the TV. The cartoon, Tom and Jerry was playing. He made his way over to the screen. Karen told him to sit on the coach, or he would hurt his eyes. He sat down right in front of the TV. She heated up his food and watched him from the kitchen. She came over to hand him the bowl and a small bottle of apple juice.
Karen left the room and went to her bedroom to get everything ready for his bath. First, she pulled the white plastic poncho and matching pants over her clothes. Then she shoved all her hair into the shower cap. She took the clothes from the cupboard and laid it out on the bed. She took the plastic bag out of the bathroom cabinet and placed all the bathing items on the bathroom tray. She hung up his towel behind the door and threw his washcloth into the bath. She opened the taps and ran the water for his bath, slowly pouring in the Barney bubble bath. Finally, she added a bath toy – a squeaky yellow duck. She went back to the living room to get him, picked him up and walked back to the bathroom.

Lenny refused to get into the bath, willingly. So Karen picked him up, kicking and screaming, and placed him into the water.

Lenny curled up into a corner of the bath.

“Don’t be scared,” Karen said. “Look at all the bubbles, so many bubbles!”

He shook his head and said, “No”.

She walked out and into her bedroom to get some fruity sweets she kept in her side table drawer. Karen came back and gave him one to chew. Lenny took it, unwrapped it and sucked on it.

She poured water and liquid soap over him until he was lathered up. At first, she scrubbed him gently with the loofah and then vigorously to get the layered dirt off his back.

“Eina!” he shrieked, “Not so hard Aunty!”

“Sorry baby love.”

“Why I must be clean?” Lenny stood and held onto the side of the bath.

“It’s so you can be clean and smelling fresh,” Karen said and smiled.
“Because, my dear boy, to be beautiful is to be clean. Remember that.”

The little boy looked at her and frowned.

“Good boys love to take baths. Don’t you want to be a good boy for Aunty?”

“Yes, Aunty Karen” he smiled and swallowed the last piece of the sweet.

She reached over and grabbed the small water gun. He took it from her, sat down and played with it. She scrubbed until her hands were red from using the loofah, trying to get the dirt off his body. The water turned brown and murky. Then she poured clean water into the bath and rewashed him. She washed his hair several times; it was hard and smelled of wood fire and sweat. She grabbed the olive oil and lice comb and got to work. When she had gotten all the dirt off, he was not the clean canvas she had expected. There were burn marks on his legs. Cuts on his arms. Bruises on his back. Her tears flowed as she stared at him. What had she done?

At that moment, the bell rang. Her eyes widened, and her heart beat faster. She was convinced it was the police coming to arrest her and take Lenny away from her.

She hoped the person would go away. But then the bell rang again and again, and it rattled her. She picked Lenny up, wrapped him in the hooded towel and put him on her bed. She told him to stay there until she came back.

Karen headed for the door. She opened it and a woman, shorter and skinnier, pushed her aside.

“Waas my kind? Where’s my child?” said the brown woman. Her face looked old and tired for such a childlike body.

“Your child? You can’t just barge into my house like this, who are you? Who sent you?”
“The street children told me you stole my child and took him home with you,” the woman called out his name now, “Lenny, kom hier! Come out here!”

“What? No. You need to leave, or I’m calling the police.”

“You don’t have to do that lady; I’ve already called them, on you. You won’t get away with this. You going to jail for child abduction. And I’m going to moer you before the police get you.”

“Get out of my house, right now! You’re not laying a hand on me.”

Lenny ran out and ran into the women’s arms. Karen’s heart sank.

The women picked him up and put him on her hip. “I suma hit you! Why did you let this woman take you home with her? She could have hurt you or killed you.”

“I would never hurt him. I love him,” her voice broke as she said this.

“Lady, you are young enough to have your own child. Stay away from mine.”

“You abandoned your child,” Karen said, angrily.

“He isn’t homeless,” said the woman, “he lives with me in the township. But he runs away from home, time to time. He’s very naughty,” she looked at Lenny and pinched his leg as she said this.

Lenny leaned into her and kissed her neck.

“He’s given me a lot of trouble since his father died of AIDS. He loves his street friends. He doesn’t want to go to school. I don’t know what to do with him anymore.”

“How old is he?” asked Karen, she was able to get a better look at the woman now. Her eyes were grey too.

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65 beat you up
“He’s six, but looks small for his age, just like his mother,” she smiled at him, and he smiled back.

The police sirens and blue lights were closer now, outside Karen’s house.

“How did you find him here?” Karen sat down on the couch and stared into space.

“Luckily you don’t live far away. The street children followed you home. They called me from the ticky-box phone. I came over with the taxi.”

“I just wanted him to be clean so that he could be beautiful, just like me. I could have adopted him.”

“You sick, you. What did you do to my child?” The women leapt forward and hit Karen in the face.

“Nothing,” she cried out, “I just fed him and bathed him. I was going to give him clean clothes and a warm bed to sleep in. How is that a crime?”

Karen burst out crying when the police walked in.

They took her away in handcuffs. Lenny and his mother went home.

Karen was taken in for questioning and placed in a jail cell pending her court appearance. She stayed there overnight and kept herself wrapped up, afraid of touching anything.

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Last words

Our parents died in a car accident in 1988 when Ricardo was two, and I was nine. I’m thirty-four. The day after my parent’s funeral, we moved in with our grandmother, Ma Shirley in Bellville. It was a quiet neighbourhood with many elderly people and a church on almost every street. Ma Shirley had a three-bedroom house, so Ricardo and I didn’t have to share. It was the house where my mother and her five siblings grew up. Ma Shirley’s house was painted milkshake-pink. The front yard was carved into two sections with a path in the middle and rows of flowers – roses, lavender, daisies, and carnations – on either side. In the backyard, a lemon tree pushed up the grey-brick paving. This was the home my brother lived all his life. He had no memories of our house with our parents in Strandfontein, which was close to the beachfront. I used to tell him stories about our parents and our lives in Strandfontein.

“Mummy used to take us to the beach for the day and buy us ice creams at Milkylane,” I recall fondly. “She bought the ones dipped in caramel and covered with nuts. You didn’t like the nuts so she would eat it off and give you the caramel to chew. You were still teething at the time. Oh, and daddy used to put you on his shoulders and play ‘helicopter-helicopter’. Your giggle made us laugh. It was so cute!” I laughed and smiled. Ricardo forced a smile and walked away.

Later, he asked me to stop sharing my stories because he couldn’t imagine them and it was too painful to try.

Ma Shirley never spoke to us about our parents; she said it made her “too sad”.
Shortly after our parents died, Ma Shirley went back to work at the factory to support us. While she worked, I was at home cooking, cleaning, and caring for my baby brother. I loved being a big sister, but I also wanted to be like the other children my age, playing with my skipping-rope or riding my bike. I was an only child for several years before Ricardo was born, and when my mother brought him home, I was so excited to meet my baby brother. I told her “he is my baby” and since then, I have always taken care of him. I have always felt responsible for him. I was there on his first day of school. I took care of him when he was sent home with chicken pox. I packed his lunches. I drove him to the hospital when he broke his arm while pretend-playing WWE wrestling with his friend, Ashwill. I made his bed when he left it undone, almost every day. As I thought of all these memories, I began to cry. Was he dying? He was young and healthy, or so I thought. I hoped that he was wrong.

A few months before, my brother called me and left a voicemail saying that I needed to come home to Bellville. I was living in Switzerland at the time, pursuing Environmental Studies on scholarship at Franklin University. We had gotten into an argument and had not spoken in three months. I tried calling him back and got his voicemail. I didn’t leave a message. Instead, I sent him several WhatsApp messages and asked for a video call on Skype. A week had passed and still no response from him. I reached out to him on Facebook. It had been months since he posted a status or photos of himself, which was strange because he was usually very active on social media. I was worried about him. I wrote on his wall:

Thinking of you… I hope you’re doing well? Wish you’d return my calls, love your big sister.
He contacted me three weeks later while I was out having dinner with a friend. The music in the restaurant was loud, and I could barely hear him. He was mumbling about needing money for something important. I rolled my eyes and remembered our last argument. Then he hung up. When he mentioned that he needed money I was disappointed. I thought he was calling because he missed me or to apologise. All I wanted to say was how much I missed him. I called back, but he didn’t answer. I sent him a WhatsApp message and asked what he needed money for? Again, he didn’t respond.

The following day, he called me back. He told me that he was dying of AIDS. I was devastated and furious. How much time? Why had he waited so long to tell me? He asked me to come home. He was getting weaker every day, and he needed someone to take care of him. I usually came to his rescue, but this time, I had more at stake. I couldn’t just drop everything and come back home because then I’d lose my scholarship. This was my last chance to launch my dream career. I had made so many sacrifices for him. I had forgiven him for all his irresponsible decisions in the past. Once again, I had to suffer for his mistakes. I gave up my dream before to support him. Now he was expecting me to do it again. But this time, he was dying. I cried for all the injustices I felt at that moment.

But I knew I had to go home. I emailed my professor to say I would need to take some time off for a family emergency and that I didn’t know how long I would be away. I told my roommate to put my things in storage and rent out my room. She was pissed because it was short notice – the rent was due in two weeks – I felt bad and gave her half the money. I told her I’d send her a MoneyGram with the other half. I was doing what was expected of me as his sister, but I resented my brother for
putting me in this position. I loved my brother, but he was selfish. I knew that Ricardo needed me now more than ever, but I felt torn between leaving to care for my dying brother and staying to complete my last six months of my program. I called our family physician, Dr Rabi, and he confirmed Ricardo’s diagnosis. I asked, how much time? He said Ricardo had six months or less. Those words made me realise the severity of my brother’s condition. I sat down in front of my laptop and booked my flight ticket back to South Africa with some money I had saved up. I had started dating someone and called him to say I would be going home, and if he wanted to move on, I’d understand. He said he couldn’t wait for me. It stung; I really liked this guy, but thought that if he really cared about me, he would be more understanding. I needed to go. I would never forgive myself if Ricardo passed on and I was not there to say goodbye.”

I arrived at O.R. Tambo International Airport after a twelve and a half hour flight. Then I boarded a connecting flight to Cape Town. While I was flying back home, I thought of my brother. I thought about losing him, and my tears flowed. I had been away from home for two years. I needed to catch up. So much time had been lost. I felt responsible for him.

Ashwill picked me up from the airport in his white Nissan Sentra. The music inside the car was booming. I put on my sunglasses and lowered myself in the passenger seat, while he pushed and shoved my suitcases into the boot and onto the back seat.

“I just put an amp in the back,” he shouted over the music and grinned as we drove away from the pickup/ drop off point.
“No wonder all the bags couldn’t fit in the boot,” I shouted back and gave a tight smile.

“I missed you, Lenay. How you doing? You mos gevaarlik to be studying in Switzerland. Nogal overseas. Naai, that’s befok. Lekker djy.” He was speeding from one robot to the next as he drove me to our Ma’s house in Bellville, just ten minutes from the airport.

“I must be home!” I said and laughed at his expressions.

“You are back in Cape Town baby girl, you must embrace your Cape Colouredness,” said Ashwill with a wink.

I laughed for the first time since the news of Ricardo. It felt good to laugh. But I also felt guilty. I smiled at Ashwill, and he blushed. He had always had a crush on me. For a moment, things seemed ‘back to normal’. I stuck my head out the open window and inhaled – earthy potatoes, oil from small spills in the road, fresh air. It was a beautiful summer’s day. I looked up to clear skies. The sun warmed my face.

“About Ricky,” Ashwill said, turning the music down.

“It’s okay. You don’t have to say anything. I’m home now. I’ll take care of him.”

We pulled up to the driveway, and Ashwill took my suitcases out of the boot. Before he left, he hugged me and whispered, “sterkte”. He got back into his car and

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66 really cool
67 and actually
68 no
69 awesome
70 good for you
71 be strong
drove off. I took a moment to exhale. I stared at the hairline cracks in the plasterwork of the outside walls. Ma Shirley’s prized garden – which Ricardo had taken special care of after she passed – had become weedy, and the flowers were dried out. I walked up to the door and knocked three times. He opened it slowly and smiled. When I saw his face, I gasped. His eyes were sunk deep into his head. His skin stretched over his bony face and exposed his cheekbones. He looked as if he had aged by twenty years. His once-broad shoulders were narrow and frail. He was wearing a white vest with light brown Chino trousers and a dark brown belt.

“Hello Lenay,” Ricardo said, giving me a hug and a kiss.

“Ricky!” My voice cracked. I wrapped my arms around him and felt his ribcage. I didn’t want to let go, but my brother gently loosened my grip.

“Come inside, let’s talk over a cup of Rooibos tea.”

He tried to move my luggage to put it inside but could not. He walked over to the kitchen and put the kettle on for tea. His clothes looked baggy as if they were meant for a much larger man. He looked like a boy wearing his father’s clothes.

“How many sugars?” He asked, taking two mugs from the cupboard.

“One please,” I said, taking off my pink scarf and denim jacket. I was wearing a white t-shirt, jacket and denim jeans. The house smelled stuffy. I opened the windows and tied back the cream curtains. I sat down on the three-seater nylon couch in the lounge. It was an open plan, so the couch was facing the kitchen.

“You’ve cut down on the sugar,” Ricardo said, picking up the whistling kettle.

“I was dating this health-conscious Swiss guy. He told me if I just cut down on sugars and fats that I could prolong my life –”

“Go on, it’s okay,” he said and smiled.
“Why didn’t you tell me about your... your condition sooner?”

“I’ve got to pee,” said Ricardo. He handed over my tea.

I watched him leave the room. As I sipped my tea, I took a look around, and my eyes fell on the display cabinet against the wall in the lounge which housed my grandmother’s brass ornaments and teapot sets. She called it her “fine china”. When I was a little girl, every Saturday morning I would wake up early to watch cartoons in the lounge, and Ma Shirley would be up dusting and polishing everything in the cabinet. The photo of our parents from their wedding day was also in it – my father wore a white suit; my mother wore a bird-cage veil with an A-line dress. The photo was dusty. I got up to clean it off. Ma would spend a long time dusting my parent’s wedding photo. We were never allowed to use anything out of the cabinet; it was “just for show”. I took out an emerald teapot and matching cups from the cabinet and put them on the kitchen table. Ma Shirley never used them. She never got to drink out of them before she died. I planned to wash them so Ricardo and I could drink out of them the next day.

When we were children, he and I used to have tea parties all the time. I had a pink plastic teapot set. We pretended to be an old English couple drinking tea.

“Would you like a spot of tea?” I said as I held the pink teapot in my hand.

“Yes, please, Madam,” Ricardo said and held the pink cup with his pinky out. “Do you by any chance have some biscuits to go with that?”

The memory of our childhood play time together made me laugh and then cry.

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After high school, my brother took a gap year which turned into two years. He spent his time partying and drinking with friends, while I was at home taking care of things. By then, Ma Shirley had retired. She baked cakes and pies which she sold as a form of income. I was working full time at our local Absa bank and studying B-Com. Law part-time through UNISA. I had to drop out in my second year because I didn’t have the money to continue. Ma Shirley had saved enough money to pay for the education of one child; she decided Ricardo would get the money. When I asked her why she didn’t think I deserved it, she said: “He is not strong like you. You push yourself. He needs a push. He needs our support.” Having lost out on the opportunity, I begged him to study straight after school like I had and he need only get a weekend job to help out. Ma said “No it’s okay” and told him he could stay home. I was furious. I told both of them it was a mistake, but they would not listen to me. Ricardo was spoilt, and my grandmother always made excuses for him. She died shortly after his twentieth birthday. He was heartbroken. He told me our grandmother was the only parent he had ever known. I told him he still had me, and he said, “It’s not the same.” When Ma Shirley died, we used her life insurance policy payout to settle the house and pay off our debts. Ricardo felt guilty that Ma Shirley had never gotten to see him graduate with the money she put aside for his education. The following year, at age twenty-one, he started his studies in Journalism at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology. He was an aspiring photographer. His dream was to photograph wildlife for National Geographic. I was so proud of him on his graduation day. I had so much hope for his future. I told him that Ma would be proud too. He cried.

Ricardo thought that if he applied to the magazine once he had gotten his diploma that he would get a job immediately. He didn’t apply anywhere else believing
he would get his dream job. He didn’t. He was out of work and home for months. During this time, he completed a few short photography courses, thinking it would improve his chances. It didn’t. When the bills started piling up, I told him to make a plan, or he would be out on the street. As Ma Shirley said, he needed a push; some tough love would do him good. Then finally, after a year of applications and interviews, he got a job as a photographer for the Cape Argus newspaper. A month later, he was fired because he was always late and only took photographs of whatever he wanted. “That’s not how this business works,” the Cape Argus editor said, before letting him go. After that, he was out of a job for two years, occasionally doing freelance work to earn an income. I supported my brother during his period of unemployment when he told me it would “just be until I can get another job, something permanent.” After two years, I had given up and so had he. He was reluctant to pursue a different career path. The one thing I admired about him was that he never gave up on his dream. But without my grandmother and me pushing him to do things, eventually, he would stop trying. He gave up on life, and he gave up on himself. During this time, I had been accepted to Franklin University to pursue my dream of becoming an environmental researcher and left him behind for Switzerland. He spent the last two years partying and changing girlfriends as frequently as he changed his bed sheets. I didn’t like any of them. I knew they were just party girls looking for a bit of fun. They never really cared about my brother. They spent a few nights with him and left. We tried to keep in contact as often as we could. I was so busy managing my studies and personal life. Every time I called him I asked him if he had found another job. He said he was doing “some freelance work here and there”. I
pleaded with him to take any job that came along. He didn’t want to hear that. He stopped taking my calls.

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He returned from the bathroom with a wide grin. “I’m happy that you’re home.”

“I don’t understand how this could have happened to you.”

“I didn’t always use protection.”

We listened to the grandfather clock tick away.

“Did you sleep with a black girl?” I said it as a joke but meant to as a serious question. I had never known or heard of any coloured people dying of AIDS. There were probably many, just like my brother, but if they were infected, it would be shameful and kept a secret.

“It’s not funny. And that’s racist,” Ricardo said, scowling at me. “AIDS is not just a ‘black disease’. It affects all communities, including ours.”

I took a sip of my tea. It was cold. I didn’t mean to make light of it. I was in shock. I didn’t know how to react. I felt terrible for saying it. I swallowed my tea and stopped myself from spewing out more judgements and prejudices.

I didn’t know what to say next. Ricardo seemed too calm and okay with it all. But then again, he had had some time to process it. He sat down on the opposite couch. He folded his hands and maintained eye contact, which made me feel even more uncomfortable.

“Why did you keep this to yourself for two years,” I asked. “Were you ashamed?”
“I wasn’t ashamed,” he said. “I didn’t know how to deal with it. I’ve been going to AIDS counselling. It’s helped a lot. The counsellor told me to call you, and every time I did, I hung up, because if I told you, I would also have to deal with it. But now I have. I’ve made peace with it.”

“How did you find out?” I walked over to him, sat down, and took his hand in mine.

“One of the girls I slept with called to tell me she tested positive for HIV. I went to Dr Rabi the next day, and I tested positive. That was two years ago,” he looked down to the floor. “My body rejected the ARV treatment. I later developed full-blown AIDS.”

I wanted to tell him how sorry I was. How sad I was that this had happened to him. But instead, I felt my old resentments creep up and boil over. “How could you be so irresponsible and not use protection? Were you drunk? You make the same poor choices you always do. Except now there’s no going back.”

“You’re being really harsh right now,” Ricardo said and frowned. “I thought you came back to support me.”

“I did. I’m here. I have supported you your whole life.” I still felt it was unfair that he had gotten the money from Ma Shirley to study further and I had not.

“I’m obviously holding you back. If I’m such a burden to you, then leave.” His voice was hoarse.

“Why do you always make me feel guilty about having my own life when all I have ever done was take care of you?” I raised my voice.
“Just go back to Switzerland!” he screamed and started to cough. The coughing didn’t stop until he coughed up blood into his hands. I watched it happen and ran over to my purse to get some tissues.

“I have T.B.,” Ricardo said, “I’m–

I shushed him, “It’s okay boeta\(^{72}\). I’m here now,” I embraced him and he cried in my arms.

I had read an online news article only a few days before about South Africa’s high rate of HIV/AIDS. It was shocking to me that over five million people in this country were living with HIV, and 270,000 had/would die of HIV-related deaths. My brother was going to be a statistic.

“We’ll find the best doctors and treatment abroad,” I said as I pulled away, my tears wetting my cheeks. “They have made some advances. I know a good Swiss physician. I’m sure if I looked, I could find someone. Or at least some specialist treatment centre. We could get help. Let me Google it.”

He gave out a short, deep sigh and waited until I finished.

I picked up my phone and entered a search.

“So here it shows, aidsmap.com HIV clinic in the U.K. DrugRehabCenters.org treatment specialists with tremendous knowledge and experience. Jonathan Lax Treatment Centre, Philadelphia in the U.S.”

“Are you done?” Ricardo said, folding his arms.

“Why the attitude?” I said, frowning.

“Don’t you think I would have had the time to Google it myself?”

\(^{72}\) brother
“I’m just trying to help you.”

“It’s too late, Lenay.”

“You always give up when things get hard,” I bent down in front of him.

“How do you know I haven’t been fighting for my life this whole time?” He retorted. “You have been away for two years, and you come back to judge me. You think you’re better than me now.”

“No, of course not. I’m trying to push you to try harder. I want to fix things. I want to make things better.”

“You are always judging me on my past mistakes,” he wiped his tears away. “AIDS is not a fair fight. I’m getting knocked out.”

For the first time, I could sense his anger and resentment at having contracted the disease. Perhaps he had been fighting for his life. Maybe he had been dealing with it, in his way.

“I’m sorry!” I reached out to him.

“I called you a few weeks ago to ask for some money,” he said. “The money was to pay for my pain medication. I ran out of medical aid funds a few months ago.”

“Why couldn’t you just tell me then so I could have helped you? I could have come home sooner,” my voice cracked. “We could have had more time.”

“I wanted to try and do it on my own.”

“Finally!” I said.

We both laughed and smiled at each other.

“You are my family,” I said, “my baby brother, my sibling, and my best friend. You are everything to me. We have always been close. I’m hurt because you kept this from me.”
I sat down on the couch next to him. I glared at him with watery eyes.

“I know, and I’m sorry,” he said, taking my hand in his and squeezing gently, “Let me help you get settled in.”

He got up slowly, leaning on the couch, and walked to his room. I followed him. I watched him climb onto the bed and smooth its surface. His movements looked strained.

“You’re right. I should have told you. Now we can never get that time back.”

“You don’t deserve this,” I turned away, wiping my tears with my hands.

“No one deserves to die of AIDS.”

“Yes, of course, I know that, but you’re my brother. Now that it’s you it matters to me. I’m so scared to lose you. I love you.”

“I love you too,” he said and held out his arms.

“It’s just not fair,” I cried into his neck, his Adam’s apple poking into me. “I can’t lose you.”

He tucked a loose strand of my auburn hair behind my ear. I held him. Tight. Feeling like I’d never let go.

I woke up later that evening while Ricardo was asleep on the couch. He was snoring. His breath was warm and faint. I covered him with a brown, fleece blanket I had brought along as a gift from Switzerland. I was wide awake, adjusting to the news. I sat down on the opposite couch and picked up his National Geographic from the floor. It was the December 2012 edition, and now it was August 2013. I put the magazine down on the coffee table. AIDS had forced my brother to give up on his
dream. I was enraged. I wanted to find the young woman who had infected him. Then I thought, maybe she was already dead, which was satisfying. I turned on the TV to search the channels for a movie, then turned it off again. I got up to get a glass of water. I stood in the open-plan kitchen and watched my brother sleep. It was the start of it all for us, I thought, but it was also the end.

The next day while Ricardo was taking a shower, I called Dr Rabi to get more information.

“Lenay, this is confidential patient information.”

“Dr Rabi, you were a friend of my father, you knew my grandmother, my brother is dying, please help me.”

“He was angry and resisted treatment,” said the doctor. “I put him on a fixed dose combination because he was complaining about having to take so many pills. He took the ARV’s sporadically. He was defaulting on his pill, that’s why he’s deteriorating so fast.”

“Dr Rabi, is there anything more that you can do to help him?” I asked. “I cannot just sit back and watch him fade away. He’s only twenty-seven. His body should be able to fight it.”

“He is at an advanced stage. Along with the T.B. infection, he also has liver problems. There is nothing more I can do for him.”

While Ricky was brushing his teeth, he told me Ashwill was getting married. He didn’t say mention it to me when he picked me up from the airport.

“I’ll call him to congratulate him. Do you know he still blushes when I smile at him? I think he still has a crush on me. His fiancée might not like that.”
“No, he just thinks you’re hot. His fiancée, Terri, she’s cool. Pretty girl. Nice ass,” Ricardo said and winked at me. I shook my head and laughed.

“He’s so in love with her. They met on Facebook. They’re planning to have the wedding next year, on some wine farm in Stellenbosch. He wants me to be his best man.”

I felt sorry for my brother. Everyone he cared about was either dead or moving on with their own lives. I wanted to confront him about defaulting on his pills, but this didn’t feel like the right time, so I waited until after breakfast. He admitted to it. By defaulting on his tablets, he had developed a hepatitis infection. He also said that the Antiretroviral drugs made him nauseous and cranky and he had the worst diarrhoea of his life. Still, I told him he could have fought harder; he said he tried, but that he was not a fighter like me. Even though I was angry that Ricardo kept this from me, I was overcome with sadness. I had been selfish too.

Later that day, I called my Head of Department and explained the situation. I asked to defer for a year. I couldn’t leave him, not now, not right at the end. I had already lost out on two years. I was trying to catch up. I was told I could defer but would risk losing my scholarship. I had my whole future riding on this scholarship. But my baby brother was dying. He needed me. I needed to be the one to take care of him. I decided to take the risk.

As the months went by, I watched Ricardo grow weaker. At first, he struggled to get dressed on his own. Then he struggled to bathe himself until he was bed-ridden and unable to do anything except chewing his food and swallowing. Sometimes Ashwill would come over to bring food or groceries, or take care of my brother so I could have a break or run errands. We fed Ricardo one boiled egg at a time and
maybe some tea. He drank mostly water and struggled to keep food down. He never wanted to eat anything.

“That’s normal,” said Dr Rabi when I called to ask about Ricky’s loss of appetite.

“I will give you a prescription for some morphine that you must pick up from the hospital pharmacy in Panorama.”

I drove Ricky’s red Uno to the hospital pharmacy to get the morphine. I gave it to him when he complained about abdominal and body pains. He developed bed sores on his hips and tailbone. I went back to the pharmacy to get some hydrocolloid dressings and antiseptic cream to keep the skin dry where the ulcers had formed. I also bought a foam mattress for him to sleep on to relieve the pressure on his body from lying in bed all day.

On good days, days when he felt well enough to talk, we often spoke about our childhood.

“Do you remember our trips with Ma to the West Coast as children?” I started the conversation.

“Yes,” he said, smiling.

“Do you remember how scared I was to go into the water because of the seaweed? I thought they were slimy sea snakes. But you were so brave. You just walked right through it.”

“Nice day.”

“Yes, it was,” I said, and gently kissed him on his forehead as he dozed off.
In the days that followed, we watched cartoons, just like when we were children, and we played ‘I spy with my little eye’. Some days, I helped him outside to feel the fresh air and to have the wind fan his t-shirt, and the warm sun tans his face and feet. I looked over at my brother, and his legs were exposed: they looked like big dog bones. Pale and skinny. A carcass. The Ricky that I knew was gone and had been replaced with this skeleton of a man. I yearned to hug him, but any movement he made or pressure he felt was painful. It was killing me to see him like that. I cried in the shower so he wouldn’t hear or notice.

I reminded Ricky about his pranks and how he tormented me with calls that something terrible had happened to him.

“Each time I rushed home to find you asleep on the couch, or playing video games with Ashwill.”

“You storm in and shout my name, and we burst out laughing. Even Ma Shirley would laugh at you,” Ricardo chuckled.

“You drove me crazy with those prank calls!” I laughed, “I never wanted to mistake the prank for an actual cry for help. I used to get so mad, but I laughed along because I was so relieved that you were okay.”

“When you called me in Switzerland...I wanted it to be a prank too.”

“You always needed to know that I was okay. Thank you for taking care of me.”

I knew this was his way of saying goodbye. His last words.

I spent my alone time resurrecting his garden, knowing how much he cherished it. I removed the weeds, planted new flower seeds and watered the soil. The roses, blooming lipstick red, and blush pink glowed. He sat on his padded, reclining
chair and stared at the garden for hours at a time. I joined him with a picnic blanket and some chunks of cheese, salami, and red wine for me. I fed him. We chewed in silence. At that point, I could only get him to eat half of the boiled egg. I felt like a failure.

The last two weeks he could not keep food down. His stools were watery and frequent. He had bed sores on his ankles and heels too. Ashwill came to see him and cried at his bedside.

The last few days he could not talk. He struggled to breathe enough to form words. I watched him and cried quietly in my room. I went on my knees and prayed for a miracle, “I need more time, God. Just some more time,” I begged.

It was a Thursday afternoon. His bedroom was filled with sunlight and warmth. My eyes opened with the glare of the sun. While I had fallen asleep, his breathing had slowed down. The gap between each uneven breath got longer and longer. It was time. I wasn’t ready. I got up from the couch I pushed next to his bed and curled up against him. I wrapped my arms around him and gently rested my head on his collarbone. One last time. I felt his index finger graze my arm. He exhaled. I kissed him on his forehead and closed his eyes.

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