



A collection of shorts

By

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(Take one before bedtime, the Good Doctor said. . .)

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Adrian's Wall

Hi-tech-souped-up-state-of-the-art-top-of-the-range. It was a way of life for Adrian; always the biggest and the best, never a compromise. Take his video equipment for instance. Its myriad of manuals contains keywords like digital zoom, electronic viewfinder, infrared receiver, linear special effects and remote editing. His hi-fi equipment is never a unit, always component based and made up of hi-fly names like B&O, Marantz and Wharfedale. Gray-import is a dirty term. These character traits of course, are wonderful for his job as an art dealer, but a drag for many of his friends. Always being reminded that you know too little, or that you make the wrong choices when purchasing long-term possessions, is unacceptable to most people; so Adrian's circle of friends was small with a high rate of turnover. The ones that remain for any length of time are typical followers with Adrian the designated leader. I believe that of the current lot I've known him the longest; therefore I must be the most faithful follower of them all. And I do follow him. I drive the same make of car; I wear the same colour schemes, smoke the same brand and miss him sorely when I'm alone on my holidays somewhere in the Far East. I love the East. It lifts my spirits after a dreary year inland. Different scenes, different smells, different people, different voices, different languages, everything is different; just the way I like it. Too blasé' for Adrian, of course, he prefers more exotic settings like the Himalayas, Peru, or the art centres of the world like Paris, Venice, Vienna and Prague; the old world. I guess that is where we differ. I like the bright lights and he likes the pomp of antique grandeur. But then, he works under bright city lights all year, and me, I'm locked away in a tiny basement room with stacks of paper, an army of grey steel filing cabinets and a single fluorescent light. So I guess that's why he needs the silence and I the noise.

That's not the only instance where we differ. I like women. He likes men; boys really. At an average age of nineteen, most of them are only half his age. Not that he shows he's forty to everyone. He carries it well; sometimes too well. Only a chosen few know his real age. Sometimes I think I might be the only one. But then again, perhaps some of his lovers have seen it as well. It shows when he is tired; tired and drunk; drunk and feeble; feeble and...and...average. When Adrian is forty, he is average. When he shows his age, you realize he's just another human being, caught in the rat race, forever having to prove he is a glamour doll and a super-being; a pillar of greatness, a masterpiece, like so many of his sculptures and paintings. That's why Adrian needs me; people like me. To act as a constant reminder that there are lesser beings in this world and that he is probably the closest thing to a god when he shares his glitzy life with the likes of me. Yes. Adrian is the epitome of gaudy glamour, a doll, a shiny bronze Adonis; a perfect sculpture; coveted by many, possessed by few. Those were the few of whom I was jealous.

I often wondered what it was that attracted Adrian to places like Prague and Paris. What on earth could be so alluring that would take him to such places three and sometimes four times a year? Alone in a bustling Far Eastern city I often dreamt of Adrian waltzing across glimmering ballroom floors with hot-blooded Italian boys, their minds on his crotch instead of the dance. I wondered what he did with his afternoons, traipsing through art galleries or lounging in a gondola. I was so intrigued by the man that I even took up art classes to see what his glittering world was like, so to speak. But although I liked the distraction that the plaster-of-paris moulding classes offered, I was under no illusions as to the artistic value of my end products. I lacked the flair, the inspiration of a true artiste and will never be exhibiting in Adrian's gallery for as long as I live...or when I'm dead for that matter.

Thus it was not strange for me one year when I booked separate travel arrangements and separate lodgings, but ones which matched Adrian's European itinerary to a T. I would follow him, not unlike a shadow, a glimmerman, watching his every move but never showing myself to him. His tour took us from JFK to Paris via London, then on to Venice and lastly Rome. Grand old cities I've never seen before. Bubbling with life on the surface with musty smells in the hotels and alleys; but always a steady, reassuring undercurrent of peacefulness; secure in their age, certain of who and what they were, never to be bothered or disturbed by the trivialities that happened on the surface. I was surprised at myself for liking Adrian's world. I liked the peacefulness these old places exuded. It was different to my musty little office. Here, there were street sweepers who got rid of unwanted paper. Worlds apart; that's what I realized Adrian and I were. Even here, in a closeness of which he was completely unaware, we were worlds apart. It caused me to feel uneasy and unhappy. It was not the young French boy in Paris who kissed Adrian full on the mouth in front of a crowd of strangers, it was not the tears in his eyes at the opera in Prague of which I understood not a single word, it was not the passion with which he shared his opinion of Michelangelo's final works with an art director at the museum in Rome, none of that caused this feeling. It was the realization that the man I thought I knew better than anyone else, had a side to him that I knew nothing about. An alien. Non Compadre', that's how I felt. I knew nothing about him and I understood even less. I felt small, unimportant, worthless. I could bury myself in adjectives as I stood on the Piazza del Gordio, barely fifty paces away from Adrian; completely and utterly aware of his every move...and he, equally unaware of my existence, there, or anywhere else for that matter. I felt jealous; jealous of the young buck with the blond fringe obscuring his eyes, laughing in Adrian's face; jealous of the pigeons eating peanuts from his hands. I stared; I never realized it until then but there on the Piazza del Gordio, there I realized it for the first time. For the first time in my life I knew exactly what I wanted. I turned away. I had seen enough and I was astounded at my realization.

That night I watched Adrian from the darkness. The room was dimly lit, the sheets were satin. The boy with the blond hair glistened with sweat; wet with Adrian's efforts. Their act of passion was beautiful, achingly beautiful. I hardly breathed, too scared to add to the motion of the sheer curtains, gently blowing in the breeze of the full-moon-evening. I watched and waited until they fell asleep, exhausted from their arduous and ardent lovemaking. Then I waited some more; but the city beneath me did not come to rest, so eventually I slowly rose from my precarious perch and forced myself in the

direction of my humble lodgings down a side alley from this grand old palace where Adrian and his young lover slept, wholly unaware of the heaviness of my heart and the dark thoughts I was fighting in my mind. The next day I took a flight back home, leaving Adrian to his own devices for another week of peaceful, careless bliss.

It was three weeks later when a haggard and drunk Adrian fell through my plywood front door with the plastic eye-spy firmly embedded in his left eyebrow. He was a mess. His hair was tangled and his grey Armani was soiled beyond redemption. He had dark circles around his eyes; at least around the one that was not covered in blood. Blood was splattered on his white shirt and I noticed he had lost his bow-tie somewhere between here and wherever he had come from. I picked him up and carried him to the bathroom, trying hard not to get blood from his eyebrow on the hardwood floor. I undressed him and bathed him, shocked at the change in his body since I last saw him naked in that passion-filled room in Rome. Gad! The Pope would have been proud of him that night! I soaped him and sponged him down. Then I towelled him and cared for his eye. I gave him a shot of espresso, shaking reality into focus in front of his eyes. He responded with tears. Tears and a confession. The words that flowed from his mouth that night caused my heart to shrink. Permanently. I could feel the iciness of his words clamping around my heart and squeezing it two sizes smaller. The dread that lurks in the dark and jumps on men like him at the most unexpected moment had struck at my friend and caught him in the act. It reached out to him in a wicked moment of passion and left him with a mortal wound. A wound that leaves no scar but certain death. I listened and I cried silently for the certain loss of the one thing I coveted in life; Adrian.

The next night I went outside and started to build a wall. It would be a beautiful wall by the time I was finished, a wall with curves, and highs, and lows. One on which I would pour out all my inadequate artistic flares. I would build it for him; a monument to Adrian. Every night I toiled until dawn, when I laid down my tools and went back inside to care for him. I would sleep when he slept and care for him when he was awake and I would toil at night until at last, it was done. Adrian's wall was done. Complete. I packed away my tools together with my artistic flair, went inside and opened all the curtains. I washed and scrubbed, vacuumed and fumigated until at last I was sure that all traces of Adrian's disease was gone. Gone from my house and gone from my life. The sun broke through the morning gloom and I put the drain cleaner back in the cupboard under the sink where it belonged, welcoming the friendly sun back into my clean home. I fell asleep, exhausted from the previous night's efforts and woke late that afternoon in time for a solitary sun-downer. I poured a Martini; two olives, just the way Adrian would've liked it. Then I walked out onto my porch and sat down on my trusty old deckchair. Same chair, the same place for the last twenty years. And there it was. Adrian's wall. Bright white in the fading sunlight, the dwindling rays playing along the curves and reflecting from the bits of coloured glass embedded in it at places. The main artistic feature of this wall was its humanness. Limbs, torsos and faces protruding from it in life-like fashion. Some ambling, some bending, some making love, some just staring out across my gay garden; each of them portraying Adrian in some activity of his life; his glitzy life. These were intermingled with inanimate scenes of romantic places; the Eiffel Tower, Big Ben, a hotel window overlooking a Piazza in Rome. And in the centre, there he was. There was Adrian in striking realistic profile; serene and peaceful as he always

was after returning from a holiday abroad. Chin stuck out, hair combed backward and a broad smile on his face. I could not have portrayed him better myself if I'd tried.

A house in need of repair

"Get the hell out of here! Who gave you permission to enter! I have nothing more to say to you!" I pushed the tall one hard in the small of his back and pounded my fists in the face of the fat one until he bled and both stumbled backwards out into the light. I closed the door amidst a cacophony of sound emanating from the rusty hinges and finally darkness descended upon the room once again. My body sagged against the door until my knees touched the floor; paint flakes and dry wood splinters decorated my cheek like torn posters of rock stars on the wall of a rebellious teenager's room. My eyes were shut tight, so that I did not have to see my wife and children cowering in a back corner; tears and shadows playing out a frightening tableau on their faces.

Much later, I opened my eyes. My cheek was numb, my knees ached. I stared around me into the dimness of the small room; the only light was that shining through the cracks between the dried out wooden slats that formed the walls. Dirt. Dirt, mould and rats. Shiny little red eyes staring from the darkness, ready to move as soon as we fell asleep. Ready to pounce on any little scrap we might have overlooked. Ready to take and devour the last bit of kindness and dignity we might still possess. The drop of water exploding in the dust on the floor next to me, forced me to tear my eyes from theirs for a moment and seek out the dry corner I reserved for myself, as far as possible from my family. I reached it with difficulty and sagged down into it to disappear into the nebulae of my dreams. My companion joined me in my corner. His eyes were red and full of worry. His course muzzle nudged my ribs before he stuck his head underneath them and proceeded to gnaw at my soul.

From the doorway, I looked at myself. Once my body was strong; big and strong. My back was straight and my shoulders were square. Now it was too thin in places and too saggy in others. I touched my head. My hair felt short and bristly. But there where I slumped in the shadows of the corner, it was long and disheveled, exactly the way I hated it. I looked down at my clothes and my nose wrinkled in response. I knew that a long time ago the sight of my clothes would have brought the taste of bile to my mouth. Now I was used to it. It was I; it was what I was; it was what I had become; and I got so used to it that it could disgust me no more. The cold left my body and was replaced by a warmth that I have not known for a very long time. I turned in surprise and saw with shock that the door was open. My flimsy protection from my enemies was open for entry and I could feel the monkey of vulnerability jumping on my back. I turned to slam the door and for a fleeting moment before the rickety door closed the hole in the wall, I saw in a passing streak of light, the beautiful big blue eyes of my wife and boys staring at me

from their corner. Their frightened looks shot shards of glass into my heart, but I knew I had to close that door; close it, no matter the cost. Even though my eyes could not meet theirs for shame, I knew I had to protect them by whatever means was left to me. I was the one that brought them here; I was the one that made the promise of protection; I was the one who had to carry it through. As the door closed I felt for the key, but there was none. My hands fell away from the splintery wood and the door moved lightly in an unfelt wind. There was no key; there was no lock; there was no handle. A heavy hand clamped around my heart as I realized how they managed to get in so easily. It was the door! It opened whenever they pushed against it. It gave way to the slightest pressure, offering no resistance. But this door used to have a lock! I can still feel the heaviness of the big old iron key in my hand. Where is it now? I looked around me, at the walls, the roof, the floor; and suddenly all seemed foreign to me. This place I came to recognize as home, as sanctuary, all of a sudden seemed very alien to me. The smell of decay told me this was no dream and I knew this was not something that happened while I was away. I was here! Present and able! Able? Obviously not. Unable more likely. Unable because I got so busy with so many other things that I failed to see the decay creeping in around me. Failed to see the growing fear on my children's faces; failed to see the pain in my wife's eyes.

Behind me, the door burst open to once again let in the familiar bright light that lived outside. A dark shape blocked the opening; a shape I knew so well but dreaded more than this decaying room.

"Get out! What is it you want now again!" I screamed.

"You know what I want, you owe me! I want what's mine and I want it all now!" Retaliated the dark shape.

Desperation flooded over me, blocking all senses; I could not think; I could not see. "But I have no more! I gave you everything I had already! What more do you want from me?" I cried.

"I want what you owe me!" it screamed again. "Come outside and face me like a man, you weasel!" It cast its beady red eyes around in disgust, searching for what it believed I was hiding from it.

"But...you don't understand....I don't...but you said...leave me alone...that's not what we agreed upon..." and so on and so on. Constantly fighting, defending, a never-ending parry for life and death. Slowly it turned around and stomped out and the door closed behind it in a gush of wind. It wanted what I owed, what I did not have to give. I owed so much to so many that none of it made sense to me anymore. Better to hide here in the dark; away from them, away from it all. Here, no one can see the shame on my face.

Back in my corner, I avoided her eyes; I pretended not to hear the sobs of my children; I turned into myself, seeking the warmth of my dreams; dreams that made me forget about my pain, my failures, my responsibilities, my disgust.

My wife cried. A flood of mute tears flowed from her eyes onto the floor. It formed rivulets in the dirt and sank into the dry floor. Once the floor was soaked her tears started to form little streams; this formed pools on the wet floor. The rats came out with their beady little eyes and reveled in the nourishment her tears promised. They licked and

sipped until their flea-ridden little bellies were distended like balloons, ready to burst. Even my soul mate extracted his head from under my ribs to watch the commotion for a while, before continuing with his vulgar diet. The pools welled into dams; these burst their precarious little dirt walls and soon the tears filled the entire floor. The flood of tears rose to my ankles and still they flowed. As it reached higher and higher, the frail walls could hold them no more and her tears disappeared through the cracks in the walls, feeding the weeds, that I knew, were outside. At last, she had no more tears to shed and the flow stopped. Still, no sound came from her lips.

The door opened and a grinning, hobbling goblin entered. He carried a long straw with which he sucked up the last of her tears, even those stuck in the folds of my boots. When he was done, he left with a murderous cackle and the door shut behind him with creaking hinges.

When the door opened again, the wind was gone and the glowing face of my mother entered, accompanied by the smell of spring blossoms and the melodious sound of courting birds. In her arms she bore gifts; food for my babies and clothes for my beautiful wife. I accepted her gifts with true gratitude; gratitude marred with the pain of regret, for I knew I would never be able to return the favor. In her arms lay all my dreams and expectations, but not in the way I expected life to offer them to me. My expectations lay in the toils of my hands and the sweat of my brow whilst my dreams realized in the loving arms of my mother. As I accepted her gifts and distributed them to my family, the despair in my heart made way for anger; unnecessary, rebellious anger, born from my own thwarted expectations and inadequacies. It grew like ivy, quickly covering every available patch on the moldy wet walls of my heart until there was only a tiny spot left for that ever-present question. "Where did I go wrong?" It sat there, like a neon sign, flashing red and blue: "Where did I go wrong?" and I felt pity for myself.

Long after she had gone back into the light, I could still see her smiling face, lit up like a floodlight, painting streaks of white across a night sky. My night sky. My heart's sky. Amongst the things she brought I found a note. It was simple, written on plain paper. It said, "You have to go outside. Your house is in need of repair." I stared at her note and I stared at the door. The sharp rays of light penetrating the cracks in the door and the walls forced me look down at her note again. "You have to go outside. Your house is in need of repair." Her handwriting comforted me; it seemed so familiar; so warm and reminiscent of feelings and smells from days gone by; like a voice, calling me from far away, in an effort to remind me of a time long, long ago. A time of happiness, love and security. A time of plenty when contentment fueled the hearth and wantonness slept outside. A time when lazy Sunday afternoons and exciting Monday mornings were separated from each other by definite delineators. All of that has been replaced by a continual darkness, days and activities melded into one by an ever-growing need; a need and a want that cannot be fed by any human means.

How could I go outside? Madness! They are all there! Everyone of them just waiting for such an opportunity, to get me alone in the light where they can see me; see me and hunt me and cut me down. Going outside was the absolute unthinkable thing to do. Was

my mother now in league with them? Have they persuaded her to do their bidding and lure me outside into the light? But even the darkest part of my heart could not find comfort in that. She was The Light. She was Comfort. She was incapable of being influenced by the darkness. She could not lie. But how could I? I can close the door but I can never open it. It yields not from the inside, never from the darkness, only from the light. "You can! You closed it, only you can open it!" my Mother's voice said. A rotten wooden strut from above crashed to the floor, causing rats to scurry in all directions; my son cried out in fear; I looked up. Above us hung what remained of the crashing plank, swaying from side to side, taking its time to come to a halt. Damn world's coming to an end. Dust sifted down on our exposed heads. I saw the fear in my children's eyes and knew I had to find a way to open that door; no matter the cost.

Outside, the wind was roaring. The walls were rattling and the lock-less door banged from time to time. Every time it opened, I stiffened expecting one of Them to enter, but then it just shut again with a wham, leaving us in a flurry of dust and dirt.

Much later, long after the wind died down, I was still in the same position. One leg bent at the knee, the other folded underneath me; ears perked up like those of a fox listening for distant sounds in the night; my one arm hanging loosely over my knee, ready for any unplanned development. Then I got up. Slowly at first, bones creaking, ligaments complaining. Eventually I felt an improvement and my actions became faster. I straightened myself to my full height, not shifting my gaze from the door. I shook my head, unruly hair flying from my vision. Slowly I turned my head and look my wife straight in the eye. It felt like the first time in a decade. "I love you." I said simply and reached out to take her hand. She got up, at first uncertain of what was to happen next. The children cowered around her legs, clinging to her skirts, suddenly afraid of their new tall Daddy. "Come," I said again, my voice dusty and dry. Slowly we made our way towards the door. It will just have to open. I wanted out. I could not take the darkness and the terror anymore. I realized I needed the light, "I needed the light!" I shouted. God! I never thought I would hear myself uttering those words. They made me feel good and I heard a gasp of hope escape my wife's throat. She wanted it too! I touched the door. It just had to open! And it did. It swung on its rusty hinges without a single creak. It gave way to my urgency like a silk curtain. It swung all the way back until it came to rest against the dilapidated wall and the light shone inside touching us, touching the flaky paint, touching the dark corners where the rats lived, touching everything. The light blinded my eyes but my nose was met with the most fragrant of smells. Flowers, trees, freshly mowed lawn; all came wafting towards us on a gentle breeze. I stood for a while, savoring the delights of the Light, attempting to take in all it had to offer me in one breath. I felt my boys take my hands, one on either side and my wife hugging my arm and together we stepped out into the light.

They were all outside. Family, friends, friendly faces I'd forgotten; all smiling, beckoning, carrying placards, cheering. The placards said many things, like "Smile and the world smiles with you", "Ask those you love, we care", "Shed that thick skin, it wears you down" and "We love you" in capital letters. Then my mother appeared from the crowd of friendly faces. "Well done my child. Welcome to the light!" she said and led

us through the crowd. People greeted us, touched us and with every touch, the dirt disappeared. Our clothes became whole again and the moldy smell we carried around, disappeared. I stopped and together with my family, I turned around. I saw my house. It was small, it was dirty and it was in desperate need of repair. The roof sagged, and outside it was overgrown with weeds. Weeds fed by the nourishing power of my wife's tears. I looked down into her face and my gaze was met with a radiant smile; something I had not seen for a very long time. I had forgotten how beautiful she was when she smiled. It gave me a sense of strength, a sense of power and the first thing I did was to take off that door with its rusty hinges and I replaced it with a new shiny white, sturdy door, with brass knobs and a big shiny brass key. My friends saw what I did and smiled at each other. They picked up their tools and helped me to repair my house. We built new rooms, new corridors, many new windows. We built a strong new roof to keep out the rain and we laid out a beautiful garden with many different colored flowers and towering trees. My wife's smiles turned into laughter. She decorated our new home with love and affection and I found it pleasing. In each room she placed flowers, books and music. Lots of music. My sons played in the garden on Monday mornings and lay on their backs watching the clouds from under the trees on Sunday afternoons. Our house took on a new shape and our lives took on new meaning. Everyday our family and friends came to help and share in our joy. Out front, we built a big porch with a lovely white trellis and comfortable chairs and couches.

Then one day, I stood in front of our house. Majestic white stairs rose from the lawn to the porch. I walked up the stairs, through the big front door, and into the house. I looked around me in wonder. Everything was shiny and bright. Light entered the house from every angle. I walked down the corridors and into the rooms. There were many rooms in our house. Some were for playing, some for relaxing, some for sleeping, some for reading. I walked through every room and my soul ooh-ed in wonder. Then I came to stand in front of a big white door with large brass knobs and a large shiny brass key. I turned the key and the door opened onto a small musty little room. I peered inside and could see the light shining through the cracks in the wooden walls. I remembered this little room and it sent chills down my spine. Slowly I closed the door and turned the key in the lock. Then I turned around and walked down the long corridor with its many brightly-lit rooms on both sides and straight out the front door. Outside I climbed on top of the huge yellow bulldozer and drove it around the side of the house. At the back I saw the little dark room with its sagging roof and cracked walls. I pushed it down with one mighty heave and in its place I laid out a vegetable patch. The ground where the little room stood that was once our house, was well soaked with my wife's tears of days gone by and the ground gave back the nourishment it took from her and the vegetables grew fast and fat.

Epilogue

We still have troubles visiting us now and again, but I learnt to face them and greet them on the porch as they come up the garden path. Then we sit in the comfortable chairs on the big white porch and discuss the problems they bring along. I find that discussing the problems provides answers and the answers make the troubles go away; and although I

treat the troubles with respect, I will never allow them into my house ever again. Now my house is reserved for my family and friends; those people I dare to share my life with. And when that ratty-looking fellow with the worry in his little red eyes comes around begging for a bite of my soul, I turn the music up and smile while I go inside and close the door on him.

The same side of the coin

O boy! There she sits on the bench, friggin Prima Donna! Who does she think she is! Sitting there like that, likes she owns it! Look at that prissy little smirk on her mouth...and that magazine! How do you like that? Probably don't understand no word's printed in it. Just for the show, I bet. For the show! O yeah, everything revolves around prissy little missy. See what's she's wearin', see what's she's readin'! Everyone wants a role model except her. She reckons she's the role model. For all! Yeah, for all. My ass for all! She's gotten that dress on again. That friggen dress that shows her legs, almost all of it right up to rims of her stockings...and oh those stockings...what a site they must look at all day. I bet they are just *SICK* of it at the end of the day! Friggen *SICK* I tell you. Yeah. Then that wimp of a boyfriend takes over I reckon. Once the stockings are relieved of their sickening duty...starin' up at *THAT!* That smuck! He with his big black Beemer and all that shines'n shakes. Makin' up for a small you-know-what, I tell ya. A small you-know-what! An' what does a clapped-out tramp of the likes of her does with a small you-know-what I ask ya? Nothin! Nothin, I tell ya. She pretends to like it for the sakif'da Beemer and the diamonds an then she shakes it off some'ere else, I tell you. Some'ere wherr'it's at! Some'ere where it's really at! Those lips like cherry bombs'll prob'ly do ya some good, if you're into that sort of thing. You know what I mean, hey? Now pass me a match, man. A bloke's dyin' for a smoke here. Match please sir? No? what'cher lookin at! Friggin faggot. Light ma'am? Up your's bitch. Howzit sonny, spare a poor man a match! There a good lad! Thanks a million! God bless you in heaven! ...and all that crap that goes with it...What a poor man does not have to do fera light, I ask you! Goddamn near've to kiss their damn crappy shoes, I tell ya. Splat! Spit on'em...spit on everyone of'em, the bastards. There was this one the other day...I tell ya. If it wasn't for ma bad foot, I'dve buried my green sneaker up her wobbly ol' ass. I asks her fer a few pennies, jus'ta make up fer half-a-bread, you know, and ya know what she's says to me? Go get a friggin job, sonny, ther's nuthin' wrong with ya! Now I asks you very nicely, who'd take a Joe like me? Would you hey? Would ya? Naw, didn't think so....bein' white an' all that. What with my busted foot and all that, I mean, you can see how my foot is busted up, can't ya? Look at that big toe. Ever seen one that that? Ingrown toenail for thirty years. Never been able to put a shoe on it, I tell ya. You could go look in my cupboard if I'd had one. You'd see one busted shoe and one new shoe. Every pair of'em, I tell ya. Every pair of'em. Left'un never worn. Could open a shoe store for left-footed people! Har-har, what you say? Chip in a few bucks fer cap'tal an' I'll make yer'a partner....har-har. I luv a joke ev'ry now'n'again. But honest, a few bucks could do me nicely today. No jokes. A man's life is not a joke. Not one anyways that mus' suffer the consequences of others like I hav'ta. Jes' you look at that bitch on the park bench now, an' you'll know what's I'm talking about. Two perfect feet. Not a

blemish, I tell ya. Jus' cas' yer pearlies t'wards them black leather boots. A woman with no calluses on her hands, has no business wearin' boots, I tell ya. My moma was a smart one. Smartest in the whole damn family and she wore boots. But she had the calluses to go with it. 'Onest 'ard-workin' woman with not a damn lazy bone in her body. Wash'd 'n iron'd till the day she was dead. Not just for us youn'uns and my daddy, God rest 'is poor drunken soul, she wash'd 'n iron'd for everyone! Rich 'n poor! Anyone who coulda pay'd 'er. Not like that bitch-sister of mine who could do nuthin' but screw fer free. That's if ya don' count the beemer and th' diamonds then, wuld'ya. There she sits on the bench, friggin Prima Donna.

Red and Green

Red and green, the colors were. Blood and grass, I thought. The crayons moved staccato-like across the page. Up-down-up-down-left-right-across-the-lines. Green legs, red skies, green hair, red face. Indiscriminately colored but who cared. My sons were happy; happier than I've seen them in a long time. There was a time they would have cried not to have shared the box of crayons. Now that they had more than enough, they chose to play with only two anyway. Red and green. Perhaps tomorrow the colors will change.

It was way after dark when I returned home from the gallery that night; perhaps ten already. I worked late far too many nights. It had been raining earlier and the air smelled fresh and carefree. I was tired. Pablo was just too much that night and I left him and his exhibition in the care of my assistant Mandy. Good girl, Mandy; knew the difference between the painters and the sculptors. A light-year-and-a-half ahead of that previous one I had...what was her name again? Beulah? Something like that. Anyway, she'd been gone for longer than what she lasted; so I guess I was allowed to have forgotten her name.

The lights were on in the house. I pressed the garage door remote and watched the door creak its way to the top. The headlights of the Cherokee flooded the interior of the dark cavern in front of me and it took me a while to realize that Gracie's sporty little red Mercedes was not in its place. Its space was filled with emptiness and shadows of stuff stored against the walls. I looked towards the house again. It was a big one. Old and dark outside but gay and bright inside thanks to Gracie's decorating prowess. She had a real flair for interior decorating that I believed stemmed from the beauty she carried within. Always smiling, no task ever too big and her children were the embodiment of her love. Yes, there was no doubt that we were the perfect family.

I still remember Gracie's face the first time the estate agent showed us the manor. She ran through the corridors and her giggles rang through the empty rooms. She oohed and aahed at everything, noticing the finely crafted ceilings but not the mould on the walls. She loved it. Loved it all from the moment she laid eyes on it; all of the forty-six rooms and all of the sixty acres that came with it. This place was hers. Hers, as if she owned it for the past six lifetimes. We moved in two weeks later, the furniture from our downtown apartment barely filling a single room. But that did not perturb Gracie. Everywhere she touched it the manor changed its colors replacing mould for gold and drab for spectacular. Truck after burdened truck brought couches and curtains, beds and wallpaper, paintings and sculptures, some her own, and some from the gallery. She held her first party two months after and the estate agent could not believe her eyes for the wonders Gracie created.

Now her car was gone. The lights were on in the house, but the car was gone. A cold clammy hand reached out for my heart but instead clamped around my throat. I reversed the Cherokee and sped off to the main entrance. The door was open; the house was devoid of life. I called her name but somehow knew it was in vain. Gracie and my children were gone.

In the music room on the piano, was her note. It started with Dear John; it ended with Goodbye, Gracie. Just like that; no frills; like she always was. There was no indication of where she went. I sank into a bundle of despair and disheveled tuxedo.

Hours later I dragged myself off the floor. A week later the divorce papers were delivered.

It was Jack who told me there was another man; a racehorse breeder from up north who had a large place on the other side of town, which he used when he was here on business. His other passion was art; collecting not dealing. So Gracie met him at the gallery then.

My gallery.

Does it make her infidelity my fault then? Because she met him on my turf? I guess deep down I knew the answer to that question. There were other reasons. Other contributing factors to the breakdown of my marriage, my lawyer called it. Breakdown? There was no breakdown. At least not any that I noticed. It just disappeared one night. Like the taillights of a car in the dark.

Gone.

Friends 'shame-d' and good luck-ed' and 'life's a bitch-ed' along the way, their eyes blabbing the fact that they knew all along what was coming. I felt like I was the last to know and cut them off. I cut them off, the bastards, the lot of them.

The erstwhile dullness that possessed the house before Gracie did, returned. Gay turned to grey and I didn't like it anymore. I missed my Gracie; I missed her a lot. I missed my sons the most. So I called the real estate agent and moved out of the house and into a small but cozy apartment on the Westside. I took only a few personal belongings and let Gracie know through the lawyers that she could have the weekend to remove whatever personal stuff she wanted. The Monday after, I handed the rest over to the auctioneers for cataloguing and disposal.

When Gracie and I started out, we had to borrow money to pay our electricity bills and telephones were things in booths on street corners. So it was just fair that she got half of everything. And the guilt I carried around, surely I had to pay for that. So the Gallery had to go too. I couldn't bear the quietness it stored in its echoing halls, anyway. The echoes called out her name and at night, I could hear her and her lover frolicking amongst the art, giggling, laughing, mocking me to catch-them-if-I-could. But even after I tore my life's work from my heart, I had not found the source of that guilt; but she left me, so I was sure it was mine. It had to be mine.

Then there were my sons; I would care for them; so a trust fund took most of what was left after I paid Gracie and the guilt. I had no house, I had no car, I had no gallery, I had no children, I had no life.

No life. Many a day while walking the streets and riding the subway looking for a job, I dreamt of putting an end to it all; an abrupt end. But there was no time for that; I needed all the time I had to run away from the guilt that still rode the crests of my sleepless nights. Running consumed all of my time and alas I was too poor to afford

putting myself out of my misery. My misery; it became an obsession when I realized it was all that I had. No gun, no drugs, no nothing.

When I had jobs and was able to hold them for longer than a fortnight, time turned into a haze of booze and numbness. Booze turned into drugs, drugs turned into warped visions of prostitutes, brawls and bars. Inevitably, I would surface when I lost the job and the money ran out. Down-and-out was a nice phrase. A right-mess was a laugh. When I was low I trawled the streets for what I could find; when I was high, I dished out what I could not afford; I had turned into a jack-in-a-box – just sometimes, the box was too expensive and I had to find alternative means. Only my tattered dignity keeps me from telling you about the inner workings of the soup houses and the night shelters.

I continued living the haze until that night that I met him. I was drunk; just a little as I was out of a job again. Who wants an ex-art-gallery-owner anyway? What skills have I got? All I ever did was buying and selling odd-looking-expensive-pieces-of-shit that interested nobody but pumped-up-bored-stiff housewives with too much money and too little husband and pumped-up-bored-stiff-husbands with too many lovers and too few escape routes. I also gave orders; and that's the last thing you want to do when you need money for booze.

That night I was trawling 57th. He was getting out of his car in front of the fancy restaurant. I was on the street-side instead of on the pavement - bums like me weren't allowed under the canopies of the fancy restaurants. His body guard stood on the other side of the car, waiting for his boss to come to him. Slacker. I should have popped him one then. I looked at his fancy coat, the tux and the bow tie. I wondered who was wearing mine and then I saw the truck. He stood with his back to it; too hungry and in too much of a hurry to notice. Instinctively I dove and flattened him onto the shiny hood of his slinky black car. The booze dulled my senses just a little too much; made me slow and the truck caught me on the knee, snapping it neatly with a crunching sound that you could hear a mile away.

My lower leg flapping aimlessly, the body guard yanked me off his boss while two more crawled from the limo. Black leather shoes ground into my ribs and guns cocked in my ear. But a gruff voice called off the dogs and fired the lot of them, right there on the spot and sent them home. All but Joey. Joey's his boy and he needed him to drive the car. He drove me to the hospital where I spent two weeks with my leg in a sling. He came to visit nine times. Every time he came, he brought flowers and chocolates and conjured booze from hidden pockets. He towered over the bed while he thanked me over and over again for saving his life. His life obviously meant a lot more to him than mine did to me.

When they let me out of the hospital, he sent a limo to pick me up. The driver took me to an apartment in an old but nice neighborhood. It had everything a man could want; TV, VCR, cable, food – good food, booze in the bar and cigars on the counter. It was mine and I still did not know his name. I asked and was told to be ready at six. I was to meet Sonny. So that was his name. What an odd name for such a big fellow, I thought, staring at the Jack Daniels hanging upside down from the bar's back panel.

Six I was ready and so was the limo. It was party-time. Many people, sexy girls that let it all hang out and enough booze to inebriate the entire senate. The big man Sonny took me by the arm and introduced me to his friends. I heard my own name, John,

and smiled sheepishly; eyes darting to the half bottle of Jack Daniels I had to leave on the table. From then on I was his man. Joey was his boy, but I was Sonny's man.

I dried out, shaped up, Sonny bought me suits and I carried out his orders. There were parties with booze for the boys and girls for the associates. I indulged in neither. I had worked to do. I watched the crowds when he wasn't looking and I checked the boxes when he had more important things to do. I checked the files and the figures, the facts and the lies and I specialized in fidelity. I looked after Sonny's business and he was happy. He trusted me and I knew I would always be able to trust Sonny. Of his generosity, I could not complain. With the money he paid me, I bought back my gallery and an ex-friend to run it.

Some nights when we had the time, we'd spend it alone in his library, sipping strong spirits and blowing blue billows of smoke. There I told him all my secrets and he told me some of his. Learning his secrets made me a better man. I felt larger-than-life; I could stand on my own again; for that I was thankful; no, I loved him for it. Many people loved him, none as much as I. Many also hated him and those I disposed of like the garbage they were.

Then one afternoon, he called for me. Joey was sent on an errand and Sonny and I took the limo. I took the wheel, he gave directions. He took me to the manor; my house; Gracie's house. The gates were open and we drove straight up to the double front doors. I'm sure they were still as huge as ever; only with him next to me I felt a little bigger than the last time I walked through them.

Inside, the house was gay and colorful. Rich carpets and exquisite paintings covered the floors and walls. Different though to Gracie's style. This was his style. My style. This was mine. He waved me upstairs from where I heard voices. Children's voices. They became louder as I raced up the last few steps. The door to the nursery flew open to expose a stunned silence. Then shouts of '*Daddy!*' shattered the moment and I could not believe my eyes. My sons, my two beautiful boys!

They were here, in my house, on my carpet, playing! The nanny smiled at me and I vaguely recognized her from before. But she did not matter. At that moment, even *he* did not matter. All that mattered was the two little faces of my boys. They ran towards me, flinging their little arms around my neck and showering me with little wet kisses. He showed me a photograph; Gracie; somewhere on the grass. I recognized it for what it was; a life for a life; then the photograph was gone. The score was settled. But I did not care. I did not care how he did it. All that mattered were my sons and our future together. Over the tiny shoulders of my two little boys I saw a box of crayons and a coloring book on the floor. Red and green, the colors were; green legs, red skies, green hair, red face. Blood and grass, I thought. Perhaps tomorrow the colors will change.

Almost there

A Single drop splashed on the ground. I turned around at the sound. My trained eyes swept my surroundings. The walls were splattered with blood. It was also on the ceiling and puddles formed between the evidence on the floor. The sound that caused me to abandon my deep thoughts seemed to echo through the quietness of the room. I always worked alone, not allowing for the smallest interference to contaminate the crime scene. The offending drop of blood came from the severed head of the father, which was hanging upside down from the expensive crystal chandelier. Another droplet formed at the tip of the nose but it froze in place as it congealed. He bled his last drop. I could feel the animal surrounding me; sheer evil hatred emanated from the scene. I could almost sense them in the room with me. There were two of them, a male and a female. She was the leader, he, the puppet. She was cool, calm and collected. She knew exactly what she was doing and she enjoyed every moment of it. He was a new addition. She picked him up 3 murders ago. This was number 24. They were young, probably not even 25 yet. She was never molested, never abused and never neglected. She was born evil. He was a different case; a drifter with no roots and a neglected childhood that he buries in booze. She took him under her wing for her own reasons and he relishes the attention and recognition he always craved but never got. O yes, I knew what they were. It was who they were, that was still shrouded in mystery. She is painfully careful, never a mistake, never a clue. Perhaps this new hired help will err. Perhaps he will be the one to expose her.

I looked around me once more, making certain I have not missed anything. The pale naked body of the young mother was lying spread-eagled on the heavy oak coffee table. Her limbs were tied to the corners and her viscera were strewn all over the room, splattering the walls. That was her work. I could see her dancing and twirling like a ballerina, throwing handfuls of bloody entrails through the air. The father's headless trunk was propped against the wall, a deep gash above his severed neck where the axe bit into the masonry. The baby was carefully laid in its mother's emptied body cavity, still swaddled in a warm woolen blanket. A ceremonial Japanese short sword from her father's den, protruded from her tiny body. It slid through her in its entirety, piercing her mother's remains and the oak coffee table beneath her with ease. The blade was intended for honorable suicide, never for the murder of an innocent. The Nanny was stuffed under the couch, her severed legs fried to a crisp amongst the logs in the fireplace. That was his work. Ashamed of what he had done a vain attempt at hiding the evidence. Perhaps he will learn, still. Learn from her to be proud of his work, proud of himself, if she allows him to last that long. I leave the crime scene and motion the crowd outside to enter. They are the evidence collectors; the photographers, the coroners and the cleaners that followed me around like a pack of faithful dogs. They irritate me, but I knew I had to

tolerate them. They are part of this drama, just like me and the perpetrators and the victims; each performing his part faithfully to the end. Outside, the cold wind bit through my waterproof overcoat. I could feel the cold seep through my clothing and all remnants of heat dissipating like mist before the morning sun. I felt irritable. My blood was boiling from the boldness of the carnage I just witnessed; so much like all the others that I had seen over the past few months. I knew her handiwork intimately. I waited in vain for those typical signs of deterioration when a serial killer nears his end. Not her. Her work is always the same; unwavering precision amongst the apparent bloody slaughter. She leaves me little messages but no clues. She was toying with me. She was playing me like a fiddle, all the time smiling sweetly at her audience.

Later, when the sordid cast completed their scenes inside the house, morbid faces emerged carrying the props. Bodies 56 through 59 were labeled, tagged and bagged. The only evidence remaining of the bloody carnage that preceded the bleak morning, were the bloodstains on the walls, floor and ceiling of the happy home she chose as her latest stage. The wind was cutting like a knife through any body not wrapped in canvas and the policemen carrying the body bags down the stairs, huddled in their jackets. Grim expressions, bought with the images and of the mangled bodies they carried, covered their ashen faces. The bags containing the remains of the mother and the father were loaded first. Those of the Nanny and the 9-month-old baby followed them into the black mortuary van. The iciness of evil enveloped the scene like an impervious viscous plastic blanket, smothering heat and humanity from everything forming part of this hellish scene. My mind drifted to four days ago.

Another time, another place, the same evil. Icy wind blew over the barren land, swirling clouds of dust and debris high into the air. A human would have difficulty breathing in that mess. A team of mortuary workers was lowering the naked decapitated body of the 84-year-old farmer from the tree near the house where he lived. His 82-year-old wife was found in the barn with fresh cow manure stuffed in her mouth and down her throat. This caused her to die of suffocation, but not before she was raped and her toe cut off with a rusty bolt cutter. The farmer's head was found in their bed with his shriveled penis stuffed in his mouth.

My office was stark. It smelled of emptiness. It contained a desk, a phone, a chair, a filing cabinet, a board on the wall and me. No dustbin, no visitor's chairs and no books. I studied the pictures that filled the big board on the wall. They were neatly grouped and dated, with notes weaved in between them. There were 24 groups. All I had that linked me to her. In all that was displayed before me, was not a single clue as to who she was. Not a single lead to follow, not a single piece of evidence to hint towards her identity. How did I know it was a she? A hunch; a deep hunch born from experience. A sixth sense honed by evil men and women whom I have hunted all of my adult life. Evil I never shared with anyone. I was married to my work. I had no woman in my life except her. She was my latest love and also the one who has frustrated me more than any of the others before. My superiors knew I was the best. No other man or woman could do what I did for as long as I have with such complete commitment. I knew how their minds worked; I knew their every motivation, their very thoughts when they committed their vile crimes. The FBI sends me where terror strikes down the innocent. Blood and guts are part of my daily life. I hunt the bad boys and girls that stalk the realms of our country, the

bad ones; the really bad ones. This one is the worst of them all. I call her Mala, The female personification of Evil who in ancient times, haunted men in the Darkness of Purgatory. She smiled at me from between the pictures; a sneer that shone with my inept abilities to catch her.

I took my jacket and walked out the office, locking the door behind me. I'm one of the privileged few with an office door that can lock. With the key in my pocket I walked the two flights of stairs to the basement where my trusty Chevy is waiting. She has a crack in the windscreen and her bonnet sports a few rusty spots. Her shocks need replacement a wash would be a welcome change. Above all, despite the fact that she once was beige, I love her. More urgent matters than a wash is at hand. My reason for enveloping myself with her comfort is a phone call telling of another murder site found. Perhaps this is where we meet at last. It is another rich house in an affluent suburb. She favors the mansions of the rich. Large expansive places situated on acres of ground, hidden from each other by high walls and groves of trees. The people who inhabit these places all crave one thing - privacy. That is exactly why my Mala seeks them out.

As the basement garage door closes, I slip into the congested traffic. The streets of New York are exactly what they always used to be; filled with vehicles. It is one thing that never lets you down, New York Traffic. It is always the same, slow and exasperating. The motto of New York should be: "If you're in a hurry, go somewhere else." I turn into 42nd and head for Madison, resigning myself to the beat of the traffic.

Moving up the driveway heading towards the house, I take in the surroundings. Rolling lawns on either side, massive trees, statues and a massive electronic gate that closes in my rearview mirror. I noticed the prerequisite cameras at the gate upon entering and wondered for a fleeting moment how she circumvents these. I pushed the thought out of my mind before it could settle. She is much more resourceful than having to enter at main gates. The driveway swept passed a sprawling porch flanked by enormous pillars. The gravel crunched under old Millie's wheels. Yes, she's got a name too. I have an annoying habit of naming things. The car, the kettle, the phone, everything I have regular contact with has a regular name. All my murderers get names as well and sometimes it is difficult to think of them as someone else when they get caught and identified. I don't give them names like Slaughter Sam or Tic-Tac-Joe either. I have an affinity for mythology. Mythology is permeated with Evil. Evil characters lurk around every corner in every mythological tale, no matter which culture. I believe that the Evil we find in mythology is timeless and continuous. It is always the same everywhere and only manifests in different forms at different times, adapting to the particular situation. In Greek mythology it might be a half-man, half-goat, playing the lute and luring young virgins to their doom. In Nordic shadows it might be a dark creature, scouring the land and devouring humans. In the Bible he is a horned beast with legions of imps corrupting the good of mankind. In my times Evil manifests as murderers and other evildoers, who look like us, act like us and live amongst us. So my murderers get their names from ancient mythology, named for the similarity in their deeds, forever connected to each other by the flood of base evil that runs through them all; like my Mala.

The house was in disarray. He was still with her. She allows him to personify himself in her crimes in exchange for his cooperation. After she has had her fill of blood, she allows him to rape, steal and destroy. His anger at society is starkly evident in his rampage. She has started to grow weary of her sport. He amuses her. That is his

Raisonnement pour l'existence. She carefully cleans up in his wake, making sure he leaves no clues as to her identity. Despite the utter mess he makes, there are no fingerprints, no hair, no semen, nothing. As if a whirlwind rolled through the house and not a man. In the living room it is a different story. There it looks the way she intended it to. The two children are neatly arranged on the couch, the girl staring blankly at the TV. Her eyes are missing. The boy is lying on his back with his head in her lap. His left hand is tucked into his chest like Nelson of old. His shoes are neatly tucked under the couch with his feet still inside. The mother is crucified spread-eagled against the wall, her entrails sprawling from her body through the hole where her vagina used to be. Daddy got his hands stapled to the grand piano before his chest was opened and his vital organs were removed. His heart, lungs, liver and kidneys were strung on a piano wire, hanging in one of the large windows as if on display in a butcher shop. I stood in the middle of the room, alone. I looked around me almost in wonder, almost in despair. I knew what I would find. Nothing.

The following two weeks brought me 6 more bodies. She is slowing down for some reason. She must be growing tired of her games. She is looking for a different amusement. Strange, blood never becomes monotonous to its devotees. Perhaps it is the art. I knew something was about to happen; I was just not prepared for it when it did. The call came at 2:30 am. I woke from an uneasy sleep and picked up the telephone on the third ring. It was the first fingerprints.

I stared at them where they were written in blood on the bathroom mirror. That they were left there deliberately was as clear as daylight. I knew it was his. She was giving him to me. He turned out to be Mason Silver, a smalltime druggie with a misdemeanor list as long as my arm. The last time his cronies saw him was three weeks ago at the Boom Box, a club on 42nd Street, which attracts sleaze. I combed the hospitals and morgues to no avail. He was officially a missing person. Two days later his body was found in a remote Motel room on Route 59. It was her best work of art yet. His naked body was suspended from the ceiling by 10 stainless steel hooks. The hooks were symmetrically pierced through his skin. Two through his nipples, two through the abdomen, two through the hips, two through the shoulders and two just above the knees. Each hook was attached to a stainless steel ring in the ceiling, by a thin piece of gut, 25-pound strength, used for deep-sea fishing. The bulk of his weight though, was hanging from his huge erect penis. Upon closer inspection I saw that she fastened a cable tie at the base of his penis, constricting the blood in his erect member and scrotum. The entire penis and scrotum was then tightly wrapped with thin parcel string, giving it a mummy-like appearance. A loop of red nylon string was then passed around the base of the scrotum, pulled tight and hoisted through a stainless steel loop in the ceiling, causing the man's body to arch upwards with arms and legs outstretched, head thrown back as if in mighty thrust. Residue of duct tape around his mouth indicated that he was conscious during the torture. His facial features were rearranged to a look of serenity but his wide stretched eyes told of horror and pain. All the excess blood was cleaned away after the body stop bleeding from its wounds. The bed was neatly made and nothing was out of place in the room. She was clearly reestablishing her identity as a competent artist; freeing herself from the diversion she entertained the past few weeks. The epitome of the scene was realized when the body was examined in the mortuary. On his left shoulder blade was a freshly tattooed heart. Inside the heart was her name. Mala. I don't know

what it was in the scene that made me feel like a schoolboy. I just had a feeling I was almost there.

From then on the Mala Killings returned to normal; clean, neat, macabre works of art. I never found a clue as to her identity but the feeling of kinship between us was growing daily. I was abhorred by my feelings but could not resist admiring her. Her style was becoming more fantastic with every new discovery. I found myself anticipating her next creation and felt pangs of disappointment when a day passed with no new developments. I stood alone in those halls of horror where she plied her craft and wondered in amazement at her skill. I smiled in wonderment at the innovation she showed in her art and I learnt to do it without a feeling of pity for the poor souls who had to succumb in order to become part of her creations. She was a Master of her craft and I have never seen her equal yet.

My days became absorbed with the hunt. Every waking moment I spent poring over the case files. Sleep became less and less important and my days and nights became interwoven with death. At one time I feared for my sanity, but I realized that there was nothing wrong with my mind. It was just my point of view that differed from that of my peers. I alone recognized the love and passion she expressed for her art, while the others only saw death and diabolic demeanor. Where I saw expression of a deep-seated creativity, they saw blood and insanity. I saw justification for the careful selection of appropriate material; they saw wanton disrespect for human life. I saw the reluctance of a true artist to display her work publicly; they saw malice and asocial behavior. Despite their worst denunciations, her art prevailed.

When I found her note to me, I was in a state of euphoria. I was called to yet another murder scene discovered by a delinquent son who came home too late and missed the party. Nobody was allowed in the room. The bodies were, as always, carefully laid out in a true artistic setting. The Grandmother in her motorized wheelchair covered by a warm shawl and her frail legs stylistically placed upside down in a large flower vase. The 16-year-old punk daughter who was good enough to stay home that night, painted from head to toe in a nice leafy green, the paraphernalia in her many body piercings polished to bright silver. The father, for his laxness in raising his children, draped in a languid manner over the couch, his back bent backwards until it snapped, holding a roll of barbed wire clenched to his chest. The mother was the grand prize. Her eyes were removed and the hollows filled with candle wax. Wicks were placed in the wax and they were still burning when I arrived. She was naked and laying on her back. She was a serene picture of pampered beauty, from the manicured nails on both hands and feet to the neatly trimmed wisp of hair coyly hidden between her legs. Her body was a picture of perfection. No excess fat anywhere and muscles neatly trimmed by hours of aerobic exercise. Her nails were painted a light rose and apart from the missing eyes there was no blemish on her beautiful body. I saw her left hand was clenched in a fist from which a rose protruded. From up close I could see the stem of the rose was de-thorned and wrapped in yellow paper. I immediately felt that the paper meant something and big was my surprise when I removed the rose from her fingers and read the note to me on the yellow paper. It was in a neat distinct female handwriting. The message contained a suite number and the name of a prominent luxury hotel in the city, together with a time. 03h00. I glanced at my watch. There was forty-five minutes left before my life would change

forever. I replaced the rose in her hand, put the scrap of paper in my pocket and left my last crime scene.

The hotel was luxurious, the best in the city. I would have expected nothing less of her. The suite was on the top floor and my heart beat in my throat all the way to the top. I had no idea what to expect, but I knew to disappoint her would be to disrespect one of the greatest artists the world has ever known. It would not only be that, it would also be an act of sacrilege to my very soul. 03h00, I was standing before the closed double door to the penthouse suite; standing before the greatest moment in my life and I savored the metallic taste of anticipation in my mouth. Without me having knocked, the door opened. She was standing there, more beautiful than I could ever have anticipated. When I saw her, I knew that for the first time in my life, I saw love. Her long black hair was brushed backwards and tied in her neck with a blue ribbon. Her face was shining with a smile that radiated love on my entire being. I stared into her deep green eyes, deep like the ocean and knew that no matter what this creature ever did to me, I would never take my gaze from those eyes. Her nose ran to a point underneath which a perfect line connected it to her full round lips. White teeth underneath the lips gave me a hint of what was to come and I relished in the simplicity of her artistic nature. She reached out and pulled me into the dark recess of the room. I glided after her as if in a trance and the door shut noiselessly behind us. In the room was a grand piano. On the piano in a subdued spotlight stood a bottle of expensive champagne and a bowl of strawberries next to a vase containing a single red rose. I failed to remember which was supposed to enhance the taste of which, but I was sure she knew. Her dress was of exquisite translucent green satin and I could make out the curves of her perfect body underneath. There were no undergarments to mar anything, just the soft material of the dress. Her feet were clad in golden slippers that moved across the plush carpet without making a sound. She handed me one of the already filled champagne glasses and placed a ripe red fruit in my mouth. I bit into it and experienced a flood of sweet juice exploding over my tongue as if for the very first time. She smiled and placed the glass to her lips. She drained the glass and turned towards the door to the bedroom hidden in the darkness outside the reach of the light. She looked at me over her shoulder and smiled while leaving the sheer dress in a fluttering puddle of butterflies at the door. I followed her as if in a trance. The bedroom was softly lit and she was sitting on the side of the bed, looking like a shy virgin expecting her lover for the first time. I undressed as I walked towards her and as I reached the bed, the last piece of clothing fell to the floor. She lay back on the cushions and opened her arms to me. The nipples of her perfectly rounded breasts perked in the air in anticipation and I felt saliva building up in my mouth. I sank into her beckoning arms without any fear and kissed that soft mouth I dreamt about so many nights, for the first time. We pressed our bodies together and rolled on the soft satin sheets of the bed in our passion. Soft moans escaped her mouth and mingled with my racing breath. She stroked my body tenderly and I wondered in amazement at the luxuriousness of her touch. We rolled over and she straddled me, enveloping my pulsating member with her wet womanhood. I slid in and out of her to the rhythm of a long forgotten lullaby. She arched backwards and in my mind's eye, I saw Silver hanging from the ceiling, my back arching in synergy with his to meet her thrust. She slid her fingers across my face and over my eyes. I saw the beautiful picture of the pampered mother with the candles burning in her eyes. Everything she did to me brought back exquisite memories of her work and I

realized that everything she did, she did for me. Every piece of art she sculpted, she did with love in her heart and passion in her loins for me. They were all for me, every one of them. In each of them, she tried to express her feelings to me. In each of them she showed me the endearment and tenderness she carried for me in her heart. Our rhythm grew stronger and stronger. I could feel a crescendo building up in my body. It gathered momentum from the speed of my heart, my lungs and the contraction of the muscles in my arms and legs. The energy flowed through our bodies and fused us at the hips. Together we rode the waves of passion that filled our beings. Oblivion descended upon me as I got lost in the warm depths of her body. My passion pumped in warm spurts like an unstoppable torrent and the last thing on my mind was Mala's lips pressed tightly to my neck, her glistening white teeth rupturing my jugular and sucking my life away. Her teeth tore at my throat until my lungs stopped sucking for breath and the pillow under my head was bathed in my blood. My eyes glazed and a final spasm of passion rippled through my otherwise inert body.

Sins of the Fathers

The folds of the world hide many strange things and some of them hide secrets you'd rather not want to know about

"I don't want to see him," said my father adamantly while staring straight ahead into the darkness. Outside, shadows danced lethargically to the sad beat of their host bodies in the dim firelight of the torches set amongst the graves.

"Nor I." Jeb almost shouted out loud. Jeb was the fourth son of twelve, my father the first.

"But he's still your father..." My father's stiletto-look stopped my mother dead in her tracks.

Zebediah stood sullenly in the corner of the small room. The bulk of his corpulent wife dwarfed his stooped stature, sending a clear message to the other occupants in the room that he was not going anywhere either. "If I could get my hands on him..." she swore under her heavy breath.

"Quiet Mara! Women don't go near the graves unless they're dead; you know that!" Aaron said. "Ezekiel, you're the oldest of us. You decide who goes."

My father's gaze flittered through the room. Jeb, Zebediah, Aaron, Joachim, Jacob and Benjamin. All six of my father's remaining brothers were present. Together with their three remaining wives and my mother, the small room appeared ready to burst at the seams. I was there as well as Aaron's eldest son. My father's eyes swept across the room, then over me and came to stop six inches above the low bed on the far side of the room. "Zachariah will go and Caleb will help him carry Mother's stretcher." He jerked a shoulder in my cousin's direction without looking either of us in the eye. "That's it, it's settled." He sighed and turned away, hunching his shoulders over the bare table. Caleb and I stared at each. Our mothers avoided one another's eyes. We left the room silently, knowing what we had to do.

Far to the North in South West Africa, as we knew the country back then, locked in between the Kunene River to the north, the Hoanib River to the south, the Skeleton Coast to the west, and the formidable Otjiihipa Mountains that rose abruptly above the Namib floor to form the eastern boundary, lays the Kaokoland. It is a dry place; a dead place where virtually nothing grew and even less survived. This is where my Grandfather chose to live, preferring the land where his father settled, over the civilized culture of his German forebears. He farmed a stretch of brittle desert in Hartmann's valley, closer to the Atlantic than the Marienfluss but much more arid. It has an eerie atmosphere when the

sea mists drift inland, covering the barren desert floor in glistening dew, momentarily, leaving a salty taste in your mouth. It is the land of the Himba, the remnants of the earliest Hereros who migrated there in the 16th century but of whom the majority left the dry, fragile environment again in the 18th century, in search of greener pastures further south. That was before the Whiteman came and claimed their land. It is from this People that my Grandmother stemmed, the woman whose frail black body we were about to inter with her husband, where he has been lying for twenty-five years waiting patiently for her imminent arrival. It is also in this Godforsaken parched expanse our family gathered for the so-many-eth time to lay the tormented body of one of our own to rest.

The Cemetery was ancient. The earth was red and dry and large scraggily looking trees with shallow roots sprouted from its surface. Many of the gravestones were small and nondescript, whilst others were large and ornate, adorned with angels and ogres. People have come here for generations to bury their dead. Before the Whiteman, the Himba, before the Himba, the Herero, before the Herero, the Bushman. In the old days, people came with ox wagons and tents and camped near the spring while mourning their dead. The hot spring water had to be cooled down for consumption, but was never near fit for drinking. It left a sulphurous taste in your mouth which took weeks to get rid of. If you were lucky, you only had to drink it two or three times in a lifetime. If you had large families like ours, you eventually grew accustomed to the taste. Nowadays people don't camp in wagons and tents anymore, they stayed at the Inn. It had no name and was built from desert rocks laboriously carried here from a place equally desolate. It was shaped with hammers, chisels and the sweat of scores of convicts in Victorian times, many who were unceremoniously buried in the cemetery in unmarked graves. It was built like a rectangle cell block with four floors and numerous small rooms like the one my family was crammed into. High ceilings disappeared overhead into obscurity and dim lights shone from its small windows.

There was no wind and I could hear the individual sand particles crunch beneath our boots as we trudged behind the man with the spade, carrying the frail remains of our Grandmother. The section of the cemetery where our family was buried was some distance from the Inn, over a ridge. It was like most of the other families' plots; amongst those of others and shrouded in eeriness. All around us were burial processions, some carrying ornate coffins with family members trailing behind. We were alone, my cousin, the man with the spade and I. At last, just as I thought my arms would tear from their sockets, the man threw down the spade in the moonlight, indicating that we had reached the Hartmann plot. He wiped his brow with his grimy cap and the polished dome of his head glistened momentarily in the moonlight. White cottony hair hung like a fringe around the back of his head, touching the frayed collar of his shirt. I could see large flecks or freckles on the polished dome in the moonlight before he whipped the cap back on, pulling the peak deep down in his neck. Then he bent to retrieve the spade and opened my Grandfather's grave. It was shallow, not more than two feet deep. The arid desert did not allow holes deeper than that to be dug. Quickly, from beneath the dry sandy earth appeared a huge Blackwood coffin. Its lid was split into two sections, the top section to reveal the face, the lower section to reveal the rest. He opened the top section first. It swung back noiselessly, red sand sliding off the lacquered wood. There was my

Grandfather, exactly as I always pictured him. Memories of me as a small boy and later as a young man, helping to carry one relative after another to their waiting graves, flooded across the vast plains of my memory like the dark waters of a gentle desert river, swelling over the restraints of its shallow banks, miles away from its tormented source; black water, silently disappearing in the night. Four of my Father's brothers, five wives and twelve children lay orderly around us. One day, I suppose, I will make my final journey here as well.

He looked so peaceful, eyes closed, mouth relaxed, the skin over his cheeks everything but taut, as if in a deep sleep. The man moved over and swung away the lower section of the coffin. His feet were clad in rough brown leather farmer's boots, the ones he wore whilst toiling in the fields when he was still alive, not the smooth polished black leather shoes one would expect with a Sunday-best suit. The deep mauve velvet lined space next to him was empty, waiting patiently for my grandmother. I admired the crispness of his starched shirt and reached out to touch it. But the little boy in me tugged back my hand, too afraid to touch the huge figure that silently dominated my family; even in death. But the strangest was yet to come. At his feet lay sprawled the body of a young girl. Her body was curled in a classic fetal position, innocence written in the feint smile around her lips, seemingly sleeping the sleep of the guiltless. She lay on her tummy, with her hands under her head. Her one leg was pulled up towards her body, the other straightened along the breath of the double-side-by-side coffin. Her cheeks rosy in the flickering torch light, her hair dark as ebony, shiny like it was washed and dried in the sun this very day. Everything around us was quiet. No wind disturbed the moment. No voices floated to us over the quietness of the air. I bent down, looking at the beautiful child. She was so beautiful. The gravestone simply said, Hannah 1929 – 1935. She died a young child, peaceful and unravished by the passing of two world wars, untouched by the relentless Kaokoland sun. She was the thirteenth, the youngest of my Grandfather's children; sister to my father and his eleven brothers of whom six remained. Then she moved. She stretched her arms and her legs and curled up at my Grandfather's feet, a serene smile still on her lips. I did not jump away in fright. It was as if I expected it. She lay on a heap of soft velvet blankets, swaddled in sleepy comfort. I touched her face, stroking her soft cheek. It was warm under my fingers, and yielding. It was as if everything else ceased to exist around me. It was just this beautiful child and I. This one who knew nothing of hardship, nothing of the pain a family can cause, nothing of the horrors one human can bestow on another. She turned her face into my hand and opened her eyes. She smiled revealing small white perfectly even teeth, sparkling in the torchlight. I looked deep into her eyes and she into mine. My cousin still stood with my inert cold Grandmother in his arms. Barely nothing of her once statuesque form and regal African features remained. A hundred-and-two years made sure almost nothing remained of her. He was waiting for the man with the spade to go about his business, preparing her final resting place. The man climbed into the coffin, creating a cocoon-like structure in the soft bedding for her, apparently oblivious of what was taking place at his feet. The girl squirmed, clamping my hand between her face and shoulder. She smiled and stretched out her arms up for me to pick her up. As if in a trance, I picked her up out of the coffin and cradled her in my arms. She wrapped her arms around my neck and her small white teeth glistened wet in the torchlight. I was amazed at her and smiled back with my own worried lips. She reached for my hand and touched it gently against her soft cheek. In the coffin, my

Grandfather moved his right arm over his chest as if disturbed in his slumber. I sucked in my breath. The child looked at her father and smiled at him, all the time not making a sound. Caleb bent down and carefully laid my grandmother next to her husband. He gently arranged the blankets comfortably around her emaciated body as if to make her comfortable for a long well-deserved sleep. When he was finished, he stood back to look at them. Two people who loved each other in life, finally reunited in death; her dark African features in stark contrast against his pale Germanic complexion. We wondered at their vastly different backgrounds and how they came to love each other; he, the invader, she, the victim. Caleb turned to me, seemingly oblivious of Hannah's existence. Slowly he nodded at me, silently saying he would take care of the rest and that I should go. Thus I took my charge and returned to the Inn where the family awaited my return, totally unaware of what I was bringing back from the grave. As I turned away, she waved at the old man with the scuffed brown boots lying silently in the coffin.

I labored up the last few stairs to the small cramped room on the third floor of the Inn and stopped in front of the scarred wooden door that separated us from our family. I looked at the little girl in my arms. Her cheeks were redder than apples and it was difficult to distinguish the African blood in her features. Grandfather's genes came through strong in her. She smiled at me, widening her eyes as if in anticipation. As if she knew who waited on the other side of the door. I turned the knob and swung the door open with my foot. Two-score eyes stared at me, at us. Only Zebediah's were still cast down where he cowered in his corner, seemingly busy with matters on a different plane, oblivious of the grave matters at hand. Father approached first.

"Zachariah? Whose this you brought with you?" He asked. I looked at my charge again. I smiled. Then at him, "Look Father, look closer, you know her, don't you? Don't you recognize her?"

My father looked nonplussed. He came closer. Looked at me, looked at her. "Who are you child? You look so familiar, you must be fam..." His stretched out hand was frozen in mid-air, his gaze transfixed to her smile. "Zach? Who is this?" He sounded alarmed. "Where did you find her?" His hand dropped to her pretty yellow dress - a Sunday dress, completely out of place in this dark and ominous night.

"Father! Don't you recognize her? I found her with Grandfather. I know it..."

"Hannah?" my father's hoarse voice interrupted mine.

"No! What are you doing here with her?" Was my mother's first reaction. "But look Dad, she is alive!" I said, ignoring my mother and lowering the girl to the ground where she stood on her own legs, smiling up at my Dad. The look in my Dad's eyes was one of amazement and disbelief. He bend down and peered in the girl's face. "Hannah?" He said softly. She ran to him and wrapped her arms around his neck at the sound of her name. Shouts of astonishment filled the tiny room. "No!" "It can't be!" "It's a cruel joke!" "Heaven help us!" Their shouts went on and on but one by one they came closer to peer at little Hannah and she just smiled right back at all their scowling surly faces. She reached out to her brothers as they came closer and kissed those that came close enough. All the time she said not a single word.

Both my parents looked old and tired, my father more so than my mother. He was sixty, she was ten years younger, but the hardships of their lives made them appear a decade older. Suddenly my father picked Hannah up in his arms and walked with her towards a

light, so that he could see her better. His eyes sparkled like I have not seen them in all my thirty years. Mother stood gravely pressed against the wall in utter silence.

“Dad, Grandfather...” My father froze with Hannah balanced in mid air. Slowly he turned around; his eyes wide like huge black pearls.

“What about the b... What about him, son?”

“Well, I’m not sure but I could swear I saw him move too.” Gasps echoed through the room. Even Zebediah peered with scared eyes from under his filthy rimmed hat.

“No! Him too? Where is he, is he coming?” The old man protectively tried to shield the little girl in his arms.

“No, he is still in his coffin.”

“Go tell the man to close the grave. Now! I don’t want him here! I don’t want him back in my life! He can stay where he is forever!” A cry of anguish escaped his lips as he swung around and my mother ran to his side. His voice frightened me. I had never seen him this terrified before. My mother fidgeted nervously, stroked his hair and whispered bold nothings in his ear; but her face was painted with fear.

But Father, why? What happened? What did he do to you that was so bad?!” My father turned abruptly, facing me. The fear in his eyes sent new waves of terror down my spine.

But even that could not prepare me for what was to come. He put Hannah down. She skipped over to Aaron and he drew her close to his side, hugging her to his leg. Slowly, my father walked towards me and came to a stop with his face barely inches from mine. “What did he do to me?” He whispered hoarsely, spittle flying in my face. “What did he do to us?” he shouted over my shoulder at his brothers. All grown men, all made burley from daily toil under the African sun; they all cowered now like frightened hogs that sees the slaughter-man approaching. “I’ll show you what he did to us!” Shouts of ‘no’ rose from my uncles behind me as my father grabbed my head between his two gnarled hands and a blinding flash of light carried me to oblivion.

When I opened my eyes, I was in pain. Great pain. I tried to open my eyes but they stung as if they had been dipped in acid. I shook my head, trying to rid myself of the irritation in my eyes. I tried to touch my face, but could not move my arms. I forced my eyes to open to see where I was. All I could see was the red earth of the desert below me. Slowly I became aware of smells, sounds, other objects moving in and out of my strained vision. My arms felt as if they were going to tear from their sockets. I could not see them, neither could I move them. What felt like the heat of a million suns burnt into the flesh on my back. The pungent smell of large animals raced in and out of my nose and mouth, along with my boiling breath. Then I saw feet next to mine. Bovine feet, the huge cloven feet of oxen and I realized I was tied by my arms to a yoke between two oxen, my feet barely touching the ground, forced to keep pace with the huge burdened beasts. I cried out as loud as my ghastly state would allow me and turned my head to see what’s behind. What I saw was the black silhouette of a man’s head and shoulders, topped by a wide-brimmed hat. Then the sharp tip of the bullwhip struck me across the cheek, laying it bare to the bone with blood pouring out of the wound and disappearing into the thirsty sun-baked earth beneath my feet. The force of the blow knocked me unconscious and I slipped away in tormented oblivion, my feet dragging helplessly through the red dessert sand.

I opened my eyes. I was lying on the bare wooden floor of the cramped little room of the

Inn at the graveyard with several concerned faces looking down at me. I looked amongst them for my father. He was closest to me, sitting at my shoulder, holding my hand. "Father... what happened? Why am I...?" then I remembered the pain, the dust and the oxen and I touched my cheek where the bullwhip struck. "Shhh my son, lay back and rest." Then I saw the scar on my father's cheek. "But... you always said..." I touched his cheek gently, tracing my finger along the length of the scar. It started a rat's tail breath beneath his right eye and ran all the way to his jaw line. "It was a bullwhip, all right, but it was not your uncle Aaron. See, my father gave me this scar and he gave me many more!" He tore at his shirt until the buttons gave way and he pulled it free from his body. His back was covered in scars. Scars he hid from me and the other children for all these years. I sat upright and allowed him to support me against his knee. "Dad, what was that, how did you..." "Shhh... No time to explain now my son, you see now how important it is to close that grave. If he comes here tonight... who knows...?" "It was a long time ago." Uncle Aaron stepped forward. "Our father loved the land. Sometimes, I think he loved that barren shit hole more than he loved our mother." He sat down wearily on a chair next to the table. He rested his one arm on the scarred top and stretched out the opposite leg while leaning back into the rickety old wooden thing. He sighed. "He loved it so much, he could not leave it. Even when our mother pleaded with him, begged him to take us away from there, warned him." "Warned him of what?" I heard myself ask. Uncle Aaron stared at nothing in front of him. His breath was fast and loud. "Warned him of the danger, warned him that he should leave, that we were not wanted there in the valley." He paused. "But no! He knew best! He was the man in the house, the husband, the father, the provider and he knew best!" Uncle Aaron fidgeted in his shirt pocket and pulled out a worn old pipe. He lit it with care and pulled big billows of smoke from it. "He wouldn't listen to her and she was the one that knew. She was from this world, she knew..." "Knew what, Uncle Aaron?" "She knew the Spirits that rule over this land. She knew they were upset about the Whiteman stealing the land from their children. She knew their wrath and she knew no Whiteman would ever get anything to grow in the arid environment she called home." He sucked on his pipe again. "She told him of Kalunga, the father of her people, the Himba. She warned him about what the others of her tribe were whispering; that Kalunga and the other great spirits will wipe the Whiteman from their brow and cast them and all those who associated with them into the pits of Hell!" His breath raced and his voice rose to a crescendo. "But our father knew best. So one day he called on Kalunga and he made a pact with him. He promised to serve him until the end of time if the Himba gods made the valley fertile for him so that he could provide for his family. Our mother was there when the Great Spirit appeared; he forced her to help him make contact with Kalunga. The Great Spirit was irate that a Whiteman would be so impudent to come to him to bargain, but somehow he admired our father's courage. So he made the pact, but he demanded more than just the servitude of our father. He demanded us all!" Uncle Aaron paused. The rest of his audience was struck to silence. "Furthermore," he continued, "he

commanded that in order for anything to grow in the fields, the earth had to be drenched with blood. The blood of a Hartmann. Thus father plowed the lands with his two-ox plow and between the oxen he strapped one of his sons. One of us! Once a year the ox whip shredded our skins and our blood drenched the earth and made it fertile and fruit-bearing. Everyday he would hitch in another son until we each had our turn and the fields were all done. On the night of the last day, the mists would roll in from the Atlantic and wet the ground. So it would be every night of the growing season until the crops stood fat in the fields. Our blood turned to emeralds, dropped in the arid, red desert. Mother would nurse us back to health and every year for twelve years she bore the plow another son." Smoke rose into the air above his head. Father coughed slightly and shifted his weight to the other leg. Everyone's eyes darted his way for a split second before Uncle Aaron continued. "In 1935, Hannah died." He spat on the floor. "He said she fell of the plow and he couldn't save her! The earth was red with her blood and he cried. He cried alright, because he knew what he had done!" Uncle Aaron wiped tears from his eyes. "Through the years, two died in the harness; Malachai and Ezra. Another ran away into the desert. We never saw Samuel again. The rest of us fled from Hartmanns Valley after he died. We left Mother in an old age home in Windhoek to fend off the demons of her past, alone; and the rest of the story is your life, that you know." He sighed as if a huge weight rolled off his shoulders. "He made a pact with a devil and damned us all to hell! Who did he think he was to do such a thing?"

The room was silent. You could hear a pin drop. Then, for the first time, Hannah spoke. "Daddy sent me." She said simply. A murmur rustled through the room. The little room shook as Mara fainted and fell to the floor, her feeble husband unable to support her bulk. "He asked me to come. He can't face you; any of you. He is ashamed of what he did." The little girl paused and moved to sit on a chair opposite Uncle Aaron. "But he wants you to know that he did what he had to do to save his family from starvation and certain death. He had no other option but to take on Kalunga's terms. The wrath of the Spirits was upon the Hartmanns. Remember one year he stopped? He could go on anymore! Remember? It was 1935. My death was a warning of what was to come if he did not continue to heed their will. Daddy did not sacrifice me, he loved me. The Spirits took me because they knew how much he loved me!" My uncles and aunts were all talking simultaneously. I could not make out all they were saying but all of them were very upset and some of the women and Uncle Aaron cried. He hugged Hannah for a long time until she pushed him away gently and raised her hand to silence the others. "The others who died after you left the valley; they were all the work of the Spirits of Kaokoland; and they are not done. Your wives, your children, our father and now our mother. None of us will rest until the Hartmanns return to their home." Her message was simple and clear; delivered with the innocence of the child that she was. Then she stood and hugged each of her brothers, kissing each of them on the cheek. "Now I am tired. I want to go back to Mommy and Daddy." She walked through the silence to the door, opened it, turned, smiled and waved and disappeared into the hallway. A few minutes later, my father and his brothers got up and left the room. We did not see them again until they returned the next morning, tired and haggard, to pack our things and to take us home. The Kaokoland sun sat high, almost at noon and it baked down ferociously on anything that dared to tread in its path. Jeb looked up into the relentless skies and wiped the sweat from his rugged brow with a grimy handkerchief. He spat onto the dry red desert soil and

placed his hat back onto his head. Then he turned to grab the handles of the plough once more and cracked the long bullwhip over the backs of the oxen. The cry of his beloved son rose above the expanse of the Hartmann's Valley and reverberated off the mighty cliffs of the Otjihipa Mountains just like his did so long ago.

Posttraumatic lamentations of a doomed groom

Hell knows not the fury of a confectionary artisté scorned; and when the cake's all finished, the party's over and you'd be best advised not to linger.

Quinn Rexel snapped the wrist of his right arm and furtively glanced at his Rolex. Half past nine. Could that be that the correct time? The city far below him was cast in grey tones and provided no answer to his question. One day he'll buy a real one and then... the unfinished thought left his brain with a woosh and appeared an instant later as a wry smile on his lips. He looked nervously over his shoulder in a vain attempt to locate the waitress and his Eggs Benedict before returning his gaze to the monotone city below. Grey-green hills dotted with quaint white Victorian houses enveloped the city bowl with its sprawling mat of buildings that spread all the way down to the harbour front. He marvelled at the human fixation with grey, white and blue. He's never been anywhere else in the world, but he imagined cities all over the world looked just like this one - albeit a little larger. Somewhere in the background someone screamed "Aaargh!" causing Quinn to spill sour orange juice all over his fresh napkin. "Goddammit! Waiter? Waiter!" A waif of a girl with acidic circles under her eyes appeared from nowhere. "Can I have another napkin please? And where is my breakfast? I've been waiting forever!" He whined.

"Whatever!" was what he saw in her eyes, but instead she said softly, "sorry sir, it will be out in a moment I'm sure..." The mouse disappeared miraculously and reappeared again almost as quickly with a tray clutched where her tits were supposed to be, bearing a treasure trove of eggs benedict, crispy bacon and béarnaise sauce. A fresh napkin was folded neatly next to the plate when she sat it down. "More orange juice?" she indicated the almost empty glass.

"No thanks," he replied and forgot all about her bony stick-man body as soon as the first morsel of crispy bacon entered his mouth. Suddenly he was oblivious to the tourists coming to see the gardens, oblivious of the students practising rugby below and totally oblivious of the funny little red tramcar he would take in a short while down to the bowels of the minute monotone city.

The little tramcar was chokka. It leaned back heavily on its tracks as it cautiously braked down the steep incline, approaching Lambton Quay. But before it could get to its final destination, a stop at the Uni bridge. White letters on a green sign on a green post drifted

towards him making nonsensical words. "No dogs, rats and biscuits allowed" he thought it said. "What on earth could that mean?" Thankfully the tram gracefully glided back into motion after the student fraternity disembarked. Through the window he saw his neighbour Veronica Beech, dressed in fake army fatigues and a sloppy carry-all slung over one shoulder. "Bloody old walk-like-a-man-talk-like-a-man-nik-bitch," he thought. "I'll show you too."

It was ten-twenty-five and Quinn Rexel felt anything but alive. The sun burnt a hole the size of a ten-cent piece in the top of his skull through his thinning hair, and he winced as he touched it. He looked up and frowned at the fiery ball through the plexi-glass canopy under which he stood. The buzzer for the blind emitted its shrill whistle seconds after the first impatient foot stepped off the sidewalk, but it was not until the little red man changed to a little green man, that the pitiless Quinn Rexel was prompted to plough his way through the morning crowd, on his way towards the other side of the street. Despite the way he felt, his pace was like that of a porpoise possessed with purpose. He was, after all, enroute to suicide.

Lambton Quay was as packed as the main shopping strip of a city of a mere 300 000 souls could be on a late Friday morning when most worker-bees have already been perched on their revolving chairs for more than an hour. Quay Computers, ANZ, National Bank, fled past Quinn in a blur of purple, blue and green. He strode ahead, not noticing the worried little man with the please-take-me-back-home look on his face, not noticing the old hag with the hole in the knee of her pantyhose the size of a green apple, staring with astonishment and a half-open mouth at her whale-like companion poised on one leg like Humpty Dumpty ready to fall, after Quinn pushed her out of his way. He did not notice the even fatter bank manager hurrying past him with sweat rolling down his bulging face and an untidy wad of files clutched precariously under his left arm. His thoughts were simultaneously on his future, which he planned to end soon in an absurdly dramatic way as well as his past and in particular on his mother. The smells that wooshed past him changed from perfume to quince to rubber in a mere three strides, but even that, went by unnoticed this morning.

Quinn remembered his mother with fondness. In fact, she was the only fond memory he possessed. She was the one who taught him how to bake. She was the primary reason why he was the genius that he was today. Many a night while his drunken father, The Sod, slept off the worries he accumulated from doing the very stressful job of train conductor everyday, he and his mother baked. They baked tarts for the church bazaar, cookies for the Girl Scouts, cakes for the Salvation Army and savouries for the teacher-parent association - until that day that he baked his first wedding cake. The beauty of the thing overwhelmed Quinn to such an extent that he believed it to be a benediction from God and vowed never to create anything else but Wedding cakes ever again. He became a legend in his community, sought after by many a bride and a confectionairé extraordinairé before his eighteenth birthday. He was a made man then. But now as he strode towards the locked doors of the Chocolate Cake Factory where he had been applying his artistic panache for the past fifteen years, he was a dud. Dead in the water. He grimaced at the flamboyant burden he had to bear and straightened his shoulders a

little. Just a little, so that no one would notice but him. It was six months ago when it arrived. A huge truck bearing the end of life as he knew it. "What's that?" he asked his employer - a fat Turk with manners like a pig and an oversized calculator stuck in his top pocket.

"That, my friend, is the future of The Chocolate Cake Company! The Super-Duper-Confectionaire-Extraordinaire Mk I. The first in the country and bloody high time too!" He snorted while he wiped the sweat from his forehead and farted loudly. Quinn cringed. If only there was a customer in the shop, the pig would not dare to humiliate him with his putrid-smelling bodily functions. It's got his name? HIS title? Quinn watched first silently as sweaty man after sweaty man unloaded huge crates and boxes from the flatbed and later he watched in horror as they assembled the machinery that appeared from within the cargo from hell. He felt like acting like an old woman and vomit and feint at more than one occasion but he pushed through to the end. The final product was a monstrosity, it had a computer brain, an unblinking screen for an eye and it baked, amongst others, perfect wedding cakes. It was meant to replace him. "No it's not!" the Turk shouted. "You'll be its operator!" His elephantine belly shook with laughter as he turned away, snorted and spat in the trashcan.

That night at home, Quinn rolled around in his little single bed and sweated like the Turk while dreaming of clambering machinery and gigantic wedding cakes falling off the end of a moving conveyer belt. For six months he pushed its buttons, made its selections, loaded its reservoirs and watched as the one magnificent creation after the other, rolled off its conveyer belt. All the while he brooded and plotted and last night he finished his plan of action. His grandiose plan, his grand finale, his ultimate victory over Turk and machine and all those friends of his mother that snickered behind their manicured hands at her drunken husband and her stool-pushing son.

So there he was, alone in the cake shop; his holy of holies for the past fifteen years, now rudely invaded by a crude chrome-and-lights machine, bound to be the end of him - in more ways than one. The Turk rarely came in on Fridays since the SDCE I was installed. He preferred to stay home and nurse his horrendous headache after Thursday nights of drink, poker and debauchery, the latter, an act that Quinn found hard to imagine the Turk managing successfully.

Quinn perched himself on the circular, revolving and bar-like chair in front of the SDCE I console. Ankles, knees and buttocks firmly squeezed together, elbows tucked in, neck extended in a dramatic swan-like perch, head tilted slightly away from the wall, lips pursed, unyielding gaze stretched taut, straight down his nose to the never-blinking computer screen and fingers poised over the offending keyboard. Click-click-click, he began. Click-click-click, click-click-click, click-click-click; faster and faster he went. 200 Chocolate chip muffins, 85 chocolate custard slices with chocolate ribbons, 60 mocha cheese cakes and 144 medium rich chocolate cakes. Then, 65 extra large coffee cakes with smooth chocolate icing, 333 chocolate brownies and 75 chocolate gingerbread men. It was almost five in the afternoon when the last chocolate gingerbread man rolled off the conveyor belt and felt softly and neatly into the waiting box. SDCE I folded and sealed

the box but Quinn Rexel did not notice. His ankles, knees and buttocks were still firmly squeezed together, elbows still tightly tucked in, neck still extended in a dramatic swan-like perch, head still tilted slightly away from the wall, lips still pursed, his unyielding gaze still stretched taut, straight down his nose to the never-blinking computer screen and his fingers still poised over the offending keyboard. On the screen though, was a picture of the most beautiful and delicious-looking wedding cake anyone has ever seen. It was time for his grand finale'. Deftly he pressed the appropriate keys, putting the cogs of SDCE I in motion for the very last time. When he was done, he got up from the little revolving, bar-like chair that served as his perch for the past six months. He walked proudly through the store, head up, shoulders back, elbows still tucked in and fingers touching in an angular gesture in front of his chest. Oh how he would have loved to be back in the days before SDCE I came to town! Oh how he would have loved to be back in his mother's comfortable kitchen once more! Oh how he would have loved to have breasts on which to wipe his flour-covered hands! He inspected each picture on the wall of days gone by, days when wedding cakes were created with care, not popped off a conveyor belt like fast food! At the final picture he paused for a while. He remembered the feeling of achievement that he felt when he finished the wedding cake for the Abramowitz couple, four years ago. It was his best creation ever! But today, he planned to top that. Slowly he turned and walked towards the rumbling SDCE I. He peered over the edge of the gigantic mixing bowl before placing the circular, revolving, bar-like chair on top of the counter top that he chose with care for both location and dramatic effect. He stepped onto an empty flour tin that he placed in front of the counter earlier and ascended the counter top like a queen ascends a throne. The heels of his cheap patent leather boots clamped tightly together, he turned ninety degrees towards the circular, revolving, bar-like chair with soldierly precision. He stepped onto a second empty flour tin and progressed his ascent to the top of the circular, revolving, bar-like chair where he stood for a moment, arms precariously outstretched like a dove on a power line, finding its balance. Then he pulled his shoulders back and looked up and straight ahead.

Far below him, SDCE I rumbled excitedly, mixing flour, eggs, cocoa and water into a maliciously delicious mess. Quinn Rexel smiled serenely, proudly and toppled forward in a graceful swan dive. Somewhere in the background the powerful crescendo of Verdi's Nabucco climaxed just as Quinn Rexel glided into the cake mix, feeling the wonderful rich texture of his creation covering his face and tasting the sweet, sweet taste of sugar on his lips for the very last time. He floated in a dreamlike state of exquisiteness and was suddenly strangely joyous over his decision to exit this monstrous monotone world created by a cruel God who made him gay and everyone else straight. He wanted to say goodbye with a triumphant smile on his face! But just then the bulbous end of SDCE I's gigantic mixing arm struck him behind the head and cracked open his skull like a fresh egg, spilling his brain out of its protective chamber and into the wedding cake soup in which he swirled, instantaneously contorting his serene smile into a crushing grimace, microseconds before his lights went out.

"Saturday morning's a time fer dancin'," sang the Turk, in his mushy mind. He thought he knew the song but was not really sure if it truly was one. The key crunched in the door and he pushed it open with a smile on his lips. "Morning Quinn my friend!" He bellowed

jovially. He felt better than he'd had in years! "I'm in love," he told himself. Today was the day he kicked that old hag that insisted on calling herself his wife out on the street! She can go back to her mother in Turkey, bloody old bitch(!), and tonight(!), yes tonight(!) the beautiful Katja will move into his house and live with him forever and ever! He was dying to tell someone. Quinn my old friend, where are you?" He could still taste the little Katja's titties in his mouth and feel those tiny little buttocks in his hands. The fact that she cost thirty bucks an hour (of which he used less than a third) did not matter to him, he was in love! "Quinn?!" No answer. The Chocolate Cake Company was as quiet as a graveyard. "Bloody poofter's late again!" He thought. Then he saw it. The Ranparan-Paratski Wedding Cake. "Oooh! Those two kids are going to be so heppy when they see dis cake!" He squealed, wringing his podgy hands together in pleasure. He danced a silly little semi-circular dance in front of the cake where it sat on the display table where SDCE I deposited it the day before. It had six levels, alternating squares and circles, sitting one on top of the other, covered in the whitest of white marzipan and gaily decorated with garlands of wafer-thin, finely crafted sugar roses in pale hues of yellow. At the top stood a miniature bride and groom under a green latticed canopy comprising of yet more and even smaller yellow climbing roses. He knew the bridal couple was not plastic, but perfectly formed by his magnificent machine from marzipan and delicately painted to resemble the real couple. They seemed so real, he could swear they were looking at him! Hmmm! They will be really glad when they see his magnificent creation and will pay the fat bill with a smile! That will make his little Katja happy and he counted out the hours and the days with Katja that this cake represented. After he had calmed down sufficiently and neatly folded the bill for the cake that SDCE I graciously printed and placed it in a clean envelope, he loaded the cake in his van, ready for delivery.

Evening fell, a nippy little southerly blasted over the rooftops and the wedding guests huddled together whilst moving hurriedly towards the brightly lit and beckoning door of the wedding reception hall. Inside, stood the wedding cake and everyone admired it. Soon the hall filled up with guests and gaiety, awaiting the arrival of the newly-wed couple. The evening was cold and the guests were hungry. In the absence of food and with a gnawing need to warm themselves, they consumed the offered complimentary sherry in great big gulps. The waiters brought out more and more and the groom's bill grew larger and larger, without him having to lift a single finger.

At last they arrived and the hungry, slightly tipsy guests stood up and roared out their approval for the grace and beauty of the usually dowdy and former Gloria Paratski, now Gloria Ranparan. The fact that her hair was too blonde, her dress too tight, her makeup too bright and her heels too high, did not seem to bother her husband, Hari Ranparan, on whose arm she clung like the leech she was. The fact that he had no idea how he was going to pay for the food for all these people nor how he was going to afford the expensive honeymoon his dearly beloved new wife was expecting after he paid for that outrageous wedding cake, did not seem to bother him either, right then at that moment. His face glowed and it was as if the guests' roars were affirming the fact that he made the correct decision in marrying Gloria. He led his bride through the standing crowd all the way to the bridal table where they sat down, all the time smiling into each others eyes like two lovesick puppies. The guests sat down, nervous about how much longer before

they were going to be fed. They were hungry; and most of the overweight uncles and cousins-twice-removed were getting rather drunk. All the time while the speeches rambled on and on, singing the praises of the bride and her family, then the groom and his family, as well as the praises of those responsible for the flowers, the food, the wine, the cars, the dresses of the bride, her bride's maids, the suits of the groom and his best man, the little cards on the tables, the serviettes with the names of the bride and groom printed on them, the still photographer, the video photographer, the poor damn sod that had to call the ambulance to fetch the bride's now dearly departed grandmother from the church service and of course, the person who created the magnificent wedding cake, the groom added up the cost of this increasingly outrageous occasion that seemed to be the result of a spur-of-the-moment decision during an impromptu act of falatio a few weeks ago in the backseat of his 1964 Chevvie Impala.

He grew increasingly nervous and before long he jumped up and hopped over like a psychic nutcracker to where the wafer-thin caterer stood with her back against the wall. He whispered furiously into her scrawny ear, cancelling both entrees and deserts with lamentations of not being able to afford it anymore.

The emaciated caterer grew eyes as big as desert plates and smoke billowed from her ears, but he was adamant and she too weak. Appetisers were out and the deserts were to be replaced by the wedding cake. He hopped back to his seat, sat down and wiped his brow with his new wife's veil, just in time to jump up again and offer his own speech filled with love and hope covered in sugar and syrup, now, with just a pinch of reservation and doubt added for flavour. The guests were sitting on the edges of their chairs, fingering their cutlery nervously. They wanted to eat! They had to eat! "Hear, hear!" someone said, "Hurry up!" someone else shouted. At last, the nervous wreck of a groom sat down, now very much doubting the sanity of his hasty decision and openly fretting about the impact of this exercise on his financial stability.

The food rolled in. Breaths were held. Eyes rolled along with the trudging trolleys. One, two, three, four, five...and then it stopped. Five trolleys of food?! Who was going to eat and who was going to watch?

"Where's the appetisers?" the bride screeched.

"Fuck the appetisers," screamed her husband, eyeing the hungry guests, "ruuuuun!" and the entire guest party rose as one man and ran for the food. They fought each other for drumsticks, slapped each other with handfuls of beetroot salad, grabbed whole potatoes stuffing it in their mouths not bothering to dish up anything and even scoffed the decorative fruits!

"Hey! I gotta use those again tomorrow!" screamed the bulimic caterer, moments before she got smashed to the ground by a fat tipsy cousin-twice-removed. She got trampled underfoot until she stopped twitching and got kicked irritably out of the way and under a table. By now the groom seriously doubted his sanity and vowed never to practice felatio ever again. When not a scrap of food was left, the crowd fell silent and turned their

collective eye to the kitchen door. It remained closed.

"I hope there are desserts" someone whispered loudly. It yanked the groom back to reality. He wiped some potato salad off his face with a shirt tail and wobbled over to the enormous wedding cake. He turned to the crowd, raising a gleaming cake knife inscribed with his and his bride's names and their wedding date.

"Dessert anyone?" he said, plunging the knife into the moist marzipan-covered double-delicious chocolate cake.

"Nooooooooo! Not my cake!!!!" screamed the bride and threw herself upon her husband, grabbing at the gleaming knife. The huge foot of a fiercely overweight aunt socked her square between the shoulder blades and she drove the gleaming knife straight into her groom's throat. The wails of the instant widow were deafened by the din towering over her wedding cake and she furiously stabbed at the feet trampling her dead groom. A hand clutched her by her hair and rudely pulled her up.

"We want more cake!" a fat chocolate-smear face screamed into hers.

"Yeah! More cake!" the crowd bellowed.

"More cake?! More cake?! Here's some more cake!" the bereaved bride screamed wildly and slashed the fat chocolate-smear face in half with the not-so-gleaming knife. Blood spurted over the crowd. It stunned it into silence. Then one of them licked the spray of blood from his lips. He looked at his companion and licked the blood off her cheek. Then the crowd fell upon the bride with their cutlery and ate every last bit of her and her dead groom, including the corns on her little toes.

A feeding frenzy erupted. Crazy-eyed wedding guests chased each other through the room, hacking off limbs and gouging out eyes, devouring each other until only two men were left standing. They were covered in blood and gorged with flesh. They bulged like balloons and their clothes were torn to shreds, hanging like ribbons from their bulbous bodies. They stood in the middle of the room, eyes rolling wildly, teeth bared and cutlery at the ready. They stomped like wild beasts and raged at each other. They stormed and collided, wobbled and slashed, hacked and swallowed until all that remained of them was a messy pool of blood on the polished parquet floor. The hall looked like Cape Helles on the 1st of May 1915. Broken limbs and bits of bodies lay strewn amongst broken furniture in pools of blood. But now it was quiet; quiet as an undiscovered Pharaoh's sarcophagus. On the little stand with the white cotton table cloth decorated with tiny yellow roses on which the wedding cake stood, there was a patter. Amongst the remaining smears of that magnificent cake laid the soles of Quinn Rexel's cheap imitation leather boots. Heels together, toes slightly out, left foot lightly tapping to the beat of a silent song. Then they broke out into a frivolously jubilant little dance, jumped off the little stand, danced and swirled through the pools of blood, all the way to and out the door; and with a pitter-patter like that of an experienced tap dancer, disappeared off into the night.

A butterfly in mid-flight

Far down below, comical little cars milled around in two divergent, crooked lines pushing and pausing, pointing and snaking, like soldier ants on a mighty mission to nowhere in particular at all. On and on they went, stopping only when the traffic lights turned red. The tableau was augmented by matching sidewalks where multicoloured dots scurried in haphazard zigzag patterns, trying their best to avoid each other, but inevitably, bumping and pausing every so often. Framing the montage were two rows of buildings, rising and falling with asymmetrical loftiness and crowned with a barrage of spires, antennae, dishes and chimneys; and then, then there was a petite figure perched on the edge of one of the tallest. From the fish-eye lens that was her vision, rose a cacophony akin to a primary school brass band on their first day of practice and it filled her senses so, that there was little space left in her head for anything else. She had to strain to free herself from the drowning sounds lest it reeled her in prematurely and robbed her of her purpose for being there. From her hip pocket she pulled a slip of white and carefully unfolded it into a foolscap sheet of paper filled about two-thirds with her ever-so-neat handwriting. It was a list, numbered from one to thirteen down the side margin. She cast a last look over the rooftops, to the green hills in the distance and the shimmer of the mid-morning sun on the strangely calm harbour before turning her attention to the list.

1. Absent father-figure

Suddenly, his image was there in her mind as she had seen him a million times before. He leaned over his desk in the darkened room, the only lights emanating from a low desk light and the ever-present computer screen. "Not now, Poppit! I'm busy. Go bother your mother!" She sees herself, a dejected little girl leaning in the doorway wearing a faded pink night frock with a peeling Piglet on the front and dragging a brand new Pooh bear by its arm. She bore her big toe into the plush blue-green pile under her bare feet and slowly turned around to be rejected a few minutes later by her mother. She grew up, knowing always where he would be, bowed over his computer, mind floating somewhere in its vast ether ways, surfacing only to reject her time after time after time after time!

2. Mother never loved me

In fact, she never loved anybody. Not her daughter, not her husband, not the cat, not the mange dog that slept at the backdoor and got kicked every time it was opened, gleefully wagging its stupid stumpy tail, ruefully grateful for its daily dose of attention. She loved the TV though, and the stupid soapies with which it bombarded an entire moronic generation of neglecting mothers every sickening day of their sickening lives. Bold, Coronation Street, The thin blue line! She knew them all! But her daughter, she did not

know; no, not at all.

3. Bobby Soames

Two words. The third entry on her list consisted of two dirty words. The name of the little tramp that out of jealousy stole her porcelain doll, cracked open the skull and crushed the limbs seventeen years ago when they were only seven, tasted like lead on her tongue. Bobby Soames, the bully that stole her lunch money and ate the occasional treat her mother would pack when she felt particularly bad about neglecting her and Bobby Soames, the prissy little bitch who stole John Connolly's heart away from her last summer with that tiny bikini of which her tits threatened to pop the strings.

4. That creep Mike Meyers that I'll never forget and never forgive unless I do this. Mike was the cutest boy in Third Form! Well, maybe not the mostest cutest of all but most certainly the cutest as far as she was concerned. The first time she laid eyes on him, she knew that boys were after all, not all just boys. Some were different and he certainly was different. Standing there on the rooftop, she could feel the adrenalin rush of the first time Mikey touched her budding breasts, squeezed them gently and called them his doves' eggs! Looking down at her breasts, flattened in the tight-fitting lycra top, they still did not look much bigger than doves' eggs. But soon, the adrenalin was replaced by the wrenching pain of a sword travelling straight through her body and on and on into the depths of her soul, cutting open places she did not even know she possessed at thirteen. For Mikey then! Who left her for and pissed off at boys for the rest of her life!

5. I never lived up to mom and dad's expectations

She was too dumb, she thought. Dad was a genius. He had a well paid job as a computer consultant. Mum, she was a pillar in the community. Always busy with some or other charity, hosting another function in aid of whatever, off to another hui to advise. "We are very disappointed in this report card!" She heard her father say. "Winners don't come third!" her mother's voice echoed through a hall decked in bronze medals.

6. Bullying, bitching, backstabbing and general bad behaviour

Oh, what are friends for if not for support! This was a general entry for all those supposed "friends" who helped her from the frying pan into the fire; John Brinkley who sold her the lemon that has thus far cost her more in repairs than a brand new Jaguar; Freya Calderwood the bitch with the botched nose job (serves her right) that introduced her to the evil Mary-Jane and later graduated her to Ecstasy; Bradley! Don't forget Bradley! He, the son of the almighty Bradley P. Jones Sr., who screwed her every other week night for eight months and let his dad have her over weekends when she was high. Little did she know that while dad was having a go at her, Bradley screwed her best friend Lisa! Little Lisa who laughed in her face when she confided in her about Bradley Sr.; Little Lisa who told her with a smile that she knew all along.

7. Nanna's death

And she did not have time to say goodbye. In fact, when her Nanna drew her last breath, she was sleeping off an acid trip in a backpackers' halfway between Te Kuiti and the don't-know-the-fuck-where. She hadn't contacted anyone of the family for nearly three

weeks while she was cooling off with “friends” up north and only got the news a week after Nanna was cold in her grave. She brought flowers and cried over the fresh mound of earth until she had no more tears. They found Nanna in front of her coal stove where she fell and smashed her skull against its iron base. She had been dead for a day, the coroner said, when her son found her prostrate corpse on the cold floor. She felt as if she was solely responsible for her grandmother’s demise and wondered if it could have been different if only she was home where she belonged. Maybe she would have visited at the right time; perhaps she would have been there...

8. Visa = debt

Yes, she had that too. Who didn’t? But with no plan as to how to get rid of it, it was as good a reason for jumping off a building as any. The bank had called three times the past week; she’s too scared to answer her mobile when it says “Private number”, too scared to answer the phone in the apartment! Truth is, it is not just Visa. It is the power company, it is the phone company, it is the department store, it is the car financing company, it’s the landlord, her insurance policy had lapsed and there is no point in mentioning all the friends she avoided because she owed them money.

9. Sex, drugs and rock ‘n roll

Corny, she knew. Corny as hell. Corny was not something she used in her songs. Those silly ditties she wrote dreaming of being a big name someday. In her songs, she was careful which words she chose; how she stitched the sentences together and always mindful of the rhythm she created. Sometimes gay, sometimes sad but lately, everything that flowed from her pen seemed to be dark and ominous. They were thoughts spawned in the many dark crevices of her life, where she hid her secrets amongst cobwebs of despair draped in pungent rotting skin peeled from her soul bit by bit. Tears welled in her eyes. She held her breath, trying to force them back into the dank alley where they came from, but failed dismally like with so many other things in her life. She leaned back into the warm wall of what seems to be the elevator house behind her and cried.

10. Mr. Drury, the pig of all pigs.

In her mind’s eye, rose the fat face of Mr. Drury, like a shimmering ghostly apparition out of a stinking, algae-filled marshland lake. At first he was so nice to her, calling her his favourite, buying her little presents and hiding them in her drawer or amongst her files where he knew she would surely find them. Back then, he did not seem so gross, so fat, so white, sooo revolting. She actually felt sorry for him and recognized deep down in his soul, something akin to herself, hidden in the fleshy folds of his otherwise drab life. There was a time when he made going to the offices of Pushkin, Levy and Rabinowitz something to look forward to; almost making sorting and pushing all those files filled with dry legal documents around, a pleasure. But the past few months were hell. He took her for granted, he did with her as he pleased, he grunted and heaved and the niceties dried up. A week ago was the final straw. He once again ordered her to stay after work and when everyone had gone, he walked up behind her where she was making photocopies, pushed her unceremoniously over the machine and flaked her one up the ass. The pain and realization of what he was doing stunned her into a rigid, electrically

charged wire doll. He seemed to like it as he only pushed and grunted harder. When he finally finished, he left her lying across the machine like yesterday's newspaper for the cleaners to take away. "I saw this on the internet today, did you like it?" He breathed heavily into her back. By the time the pain and her tears of indignation subsided, he had long gone. The next day she stayed in bed and the next, and the next. Soon the company wrote to inform her that she was fired. They sited a host of reasons, most of which she did not get to read for the painful tears returned and completely blurred the neat handwriting of Mr. Drury.

11. Tami Tahakawa is going to kill me anyway

That day she received the letter from Mr. Drury, she used her last bit of blow. After that, Tami did not want to supply anymore before she had not paid her bill. That bill was the biggest of all. It was actually ridiculously huge! She's never owed anyone that much before and there was no way that she was going to be able to pay it, never in a million years. Since then, she had been running away from him and got high on the gratuity of others, buying small fixes with favors, from those who still wanted favors. This is one alley from which she saw absolutely no way out.

12. About to be evicted from my apartment

Two days ago, she got the eviction notice stuck under her apartment door. It was signed by the chief rat, Mrs. Tamati, who rented those rat holes she called apartments. The chief rat had not been in her apartment since she moved in and she would be appalled at the state it was in. It smelled of mouldy pizza stuffed under the bed and opened and half-eaten tins of food standing on anything with a horizontal surface. There were unwashed clothes strewn all around the little room and cockroaches were feasting on the unidentifiable remains of many an old meal stuck to an assortment of crockery, strewn around the bathroom. 'Insectopia', some of her friends called it while snickering behind closed fists.

13. Slammed by the band

The Sonic Tikis was her life. She lived to sing and play the guitar. Even as she stared out over Te Whanganui a Tara, she was creating lyrics in her head. It was as if her whole existence centred on creating music. She lived for song, she lived to create it, express her feelings through it! Thus, her sisters' abandonment was a death sentence. To replace her with that bitch Ahua was encasing her in a lead coffin before she was properly dead. She reflected on the scene that was the immediate aftermath of her girlfriends telling her she is not part of the band anymore; the band that she put together. They voted, they said, avoiding her eyes. They knew her eyes would be full of tears and they did not want to see it. They could not take her unpredictable outbursts of rage and her lyrics did not suit the band's style anymore. She screamed, she cried, she pleaded; all fell on deaf ears. The girls had had enough. How many times in the past had she promised them and herself that she will stop putting them down, stop losing her temper, stop being so selfish! A million times if not more and every time she would find herself having to apologize again and again. She deserved what she got, she told herself. She deserved it as surely as she planned her demise herself.

Far down below, comical little cars milled around in two divergent, crooked lines pushing and pausing, pointing and snaking, like soldier ants on a mighty mission to nowhere in particular at all. On and on they went, stopping only when the traffic lights turned red. He used to grin silently at their antics from his heavenly perch, but not this morning. The steel and Perspex walls around him wanted to squash him. The steel frame of the crane that rose from the depths below rushed up to him in a continuous and blinding speed. Outside the heavens spun at an alarming rate and sweat ran down his ashen face in icy cold rivulets of fear. A voice he has never heard before screamed hoarsely from his throat and his arms grabbed wildly at anything that came within their range. The legs of his workman's coveralls and his scuffed brown leather boots were stained dark with urine. He was dying, he was sure of it.

Down below in the work pit, his mates stared wild-eyed up to the violently swing crane. Never had they seen anything like this. "Someone g't up there!" screamed the foreman. Three dirty orange-clad men jumped into a sprint, almost at once. But it is a hefty climb to the top, four minutes if you're fit, eight if you're not.

In the control car of the crane, the blue coverall-ed man clung on to the controls for dear life. For thirty-three years he had been operating cranes and never once had he been feared the height. Why suddenly now? Down below him, he did not see the frantic orange dot suspended between the girders of the steel frame of the crane.

She stood with her list tightly crumpled in her fists, squashed against her doves' eggs breasts. Her eyes were tightly shut with tears squeezing from the corners. A lonely sob wracked through her entire being as she stepped out onto the ledge of no return. She tried to take in the beauty of the city and the ocean below her one last time, but the tears that blurred her vision robbed her of that. But as she stood there on the ledge, toes pointing downwards, other visions began to form behind the tears. First her father; a calm smiling face, the face he wore when he came to kiss her in bed at night. He did not always have time to read a story, but he always came to kiss her goodnight. Then her mother, tired from another flight, but glad to be home; glad and even willing to share a warm cup of hot chocolate with her and dad. Lastly her Nanna's stern but friendly face loomed in front of hers. "What are you doing, dear?" She said. "Can I help?" The old woman stood in the door of the Marae, friendly wisps of smoke coming from the umu she was tending. Memories of a childhood spent in the closeness and comfort of the Whanau with weekends at the Marae where she met her friends that became the Sonic Tikis. The same girls that Tim Timo himself said will soon be ready for next year's Polyphusion! She was always there, wasn't she? She took a step backward, suddenly wavering in her decision. Is she doing the right thing? This is so final! "What if... what if I could fix all this? But I can't! That's why I made the list! I already tried... what if... what if Dad can fix this? Would he? Could he?" She took another step backward. "Perhaps I should talk to Dad first, I can always come back here if he rejects me." Her mind whirled. A little light went on at the end of that dark, long tunnel.

The man in the orange coverall reached the door of the control car. Inside, the blue coverall-ed colleague sat in a puddle of piss, whimpering like a baby and hanging on to the control levers as if hugging a tree.

“Hey! Let go! Let go!” Orange screamed. He wrestled with his crazy colleague for control of the crane, stretching the stretch of the unstretchable, to reach the green button marked OFF. The crane gyrated like a Latin dancer, the forty foot steel girder hanging off the end of it, swinging in an ever-widening arc. Finally he reached the button and slammed his palm on top of it. He looked out the window as he pinned his colleague underneath a knee in a painful grip and followed the girder as it swept across the skyline. He screamed a frightful scream that only he and his vertigo-ed colleague heard when the forty-foot steel girder struck a small figure on the roof of an adjacent building square between the shoulder blades and pushed it like a rag doll ahead of it in its path. The force of it flung the small figure halfway across the road below before it came to a halt in mid-air, head back, arms outstretched and feet together, for just a moment, a butterfly in mid-flight, before plummeting to the asphalt far below.