The Substance of Night

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ABSTRACT

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The Substance of Night is a series of linked short stories and fragments. Read in relation to one another, they take the form of an aggressively punctuated coming-of-age narrative in which the protagonist, Alice Webster, comes to terms with the limits of her youthful freedom.

In terms of the short story form, I am most interested in tales that deviate from the norm, departing from or reinventing the generic conventions. I am particularly fascinated by the narrative strategies of certain stories by Alice Munro and Mavis Gallant that are unconventionally episodic, stretching over lengthy periods of time and spanning different geographic settings. This extended episodic form is a more fitting vehicle for my essentially lyrical, stream-of-conscious subject matter than the short, sharp shocks of a writer like Raymond Carver.

The tales in this collection are characterised by constant motion, repeated arrivals and departures, a sense of forever coming and going. They explore a series of crucible incidents that take place in Alice's childhood and early twenties, determining her sense of emergent identity as a young South African woman in perpetual flight from her motherland. The death of her mother is a point of departure and constant return in the narrative trajectory, key to the protagonist's sense of restlessness. *The Substance of Night* is a work in progress and future stories will further examine Alice's relationship with her 'motherland'.

Methodologically, I am drawn to that murky territory between fact and fiction. In writing these stories, I am seeking to forge a stylistic unity from my journalistic background and my fictional aspirations. I was initially drawn to the first person mode of the autobiography or memoir form because of a perceived fidelity to facts as they happen. However, over the course of my MA, I have gravitated towards the limited third person narrator, finding greater freedom there: a liberty to invent, to play with the events of the past,

to reshape and restructure. This fluid relationship to the past is well suited to the content of my fictional project, which is, in some senses, an attempt to re-imagine my own nationhood.

CONCEPTION

Summer 1968

Mother, you are my first address. Suspended in the in of in, in you.

Before you, what was I?

Just a twinkle in my father's eye?

"Where are we meeting?" No answer. She is temporarily distracted by her eye in the mirror. Opening her mouth slightly, she closes her left eye and runs the smooth black liquid along the upper lid. Smudge.

"Damn!" She pushes the fleshy overspill of breast back into the confines of her lace bra and shifts her large bottom on the hard seat in front of her dressing table.

"Lu-uuuke," she half sings. Spitting on a piece of tissue, she wipes away the shaky line and starts again. Claudia Cardinale. Sophia Loren. Must be straight and not too thick. Only above, never below. She paints again, this time smoothly.

"Luke?"

"At The Lighthouse. We'll park the car at The Royal and walk over to The Coliseum afterwards."

"But they don't serve booze there, do they?"

"Don't think so."

"What time does the movie start?"

"Don't know."

"Can't wait. I've been dying to see this. 'Romeo, Romeo! Where art thou, Romeo?' Better take some of these," she says, grabbing a handful of tissues and stuffing them into her snakeskin handbag.

"Actually Barry and I were thinking *2001*."

"2001 what?"

"The new Kubrick."

"What, the outer space thing? Forget about it."

"What do you mean forget about it? Jesus, it's the biggest thing since bubblegum."

She walks over to the built-in cupboard. The light from the flashing Coca-Cola sign on the block of flats across the way is making wavy patterns on the outside balcony wall. She can hear the sea. Smell its saltiness in the thick evening air. It is high tide. On the street below two young African men are squabbling. She thinks she recognizes one. The one in the white safari uniform with the red stripe around the cuffs. Isn't he the boy who polishes the corridors red? Always on his hands and knees with a tin of Cobra polish and a dirty orange cloth. "Sawubona, Madam." She can't be sure. It's too high up here. The bigger man pushes him against the rough brick wall alongside the Greek corner shop. She turns away and takes out her new black mini dress. The dress is not quite as mini as mini can be, so she can probably get away with it. High heels will do the trick. It'll be cool in this heat at any rate.

He is sitting on the bed in his towel. His dark curly hair, still wet from the shower, drips onto the newspaper spread out in front of him. "Listen to this," he says, putting on his horn-rim glasses. "It's the New York review: 'Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* explores at greater length the question taken up in *Planet of the Apes*...'"

"But I hated that silly monkey movie."

"For Christ's sake, Charlotte, just listen for a moment, will you. Where was I? *Planet of the Apes* ... okay ... 'the question taken up in *Planet of the Apes*, regarding the forces which control man's evolution. Shot in England at a cost of $10.5 million, *2001* aims to restore speculative thought to science fiction film, along with a primitive sense of wonder which harks back to the early days of cinema.'"

"Okay, okay."

"Images of vast, complex spacecraft float infinitely slowly through deep space to the strains of Strauss' *Blue Danube Waltz*."

"All right, you've convinced me. I'll see the Zeffirelli another time."

Always this tug of war. Whether to stick to her guns or give in. Hadn't she been giving in a little too much lately? That's when men lose interest. She's got to keep her side up if she wants it to work. Mustn't lose herself. That would be disastrous. What a fine balance. What an unbelievably fine line. Even more painstakingly delicate than the kohl lines on her eyelids. And the smudges? Indelible. Will life always be like this? Constantly teetering between letting go and holding back? It's no easy deal being a woman, she thinks -- keeping the yes and no in balance.

She'd agreed to live down on the slightly grotty beach front for starters, when ideally she'd have preferred their first home to be somewhere small but gracious on the Berea. A nice old colonial house with a wide verandah and a garden with a palm tree. But here she is in their rented two-bedroom flat on Gillespie Street feeling quite satisfied and happy for the moment (if only the pigeons would stop shitting on the balcony).

The tide is turning and the cool air is thick with salt, as the city day grinds to a close. From this height she can't tell the difference between the hum of traffic and the waves rolling onto the shores of Addington Beach. Both seem somehow soothing at this early evening hour. A bus hisses and there is a plaintive wailing of brakes, but from here they could be jungle sounds. Strange Congolese birds in a dense thicket of jungle life. A breeze blows in off the cooling ocean touching her shoulders and lifting the fresh scent off her bathed skin. Yes.

She's been saying yes a lot lately... Me? Saturday night? Yes, I love calamari. Red wine? Why not? Night turns to light and before she knows it they're walking along South Beach at

sunrise. Sand between the toes, waves of joy and a greasy breakfast at the XL diner. Silly laughter feels good. Even better when there's nobody else around and it's dark ... quiet.

Yes, I like it. Take your hand higher. Lift my flimsy skirt. Yes. This is it. I'm sure of it. This is what I've been waiting for. So put your foot down flat, Luke Webster. I like it when you drive at 80 miles per hour. Make me breathless with speed and recklessness. Take it to the limit with me because I'm your girl. I'm the strange, foreign woman you thought you'd never know. Keep talking. I love that Ellis and Co. article clerk's voice of yours. Your rare, manly elocution -- so terribly legal when your soul is unspeakably wild. As stubborn and immutable as these African landscapes. You are rock and this will be my undoing. Your solidity, your steadfast will.

You were born here and there is something native about your ways. The soles of your feet are less tender than mine. You can walk barefoot on this rough terrain and that is something I fear I will never be able to do. I will wear my Bruno Magli heels and tread elegantly like a guest at a crazy Southern cocktail party that is called to an end abruptly, before the last sozzled diehards have even dreamed of leaving. Yes, Luke Webster, I like your big, old silver Valiant that seats four across the front seat. Wake me for your pre-dawn departures. Take me on your 10-hour road trips. Show me your country -- this strange, ancient earth. Allow me to trespass with you, love.

Me? Yes. I do. I take this man Luke Charles Webster to be my lawful wedded husband. To have and to hold from this day forward...

Well, that was a big yes. And she had wanted to say it. More than anything else she'd ever wanted in her entire life. When she says yes to him good things happen. She feels alive. She feels adored. It's like they're starring in their very own movie - just her and him: masculine/feminine. Yes.

Luke is still reading: "...At its heart, the film contains one of the most stunning jump cuts in the history of film - the moment when an animal bone hurled into the air by a prehistoric man

is transformed into a slowly turning spaceship. We follow space-age man Keir Dullea in a search for a Higher Power behind a mysterious monolith discovered on the moon."

"Mmmm," she says, trying to regain her focus on his words. "Well, I suppose..."

Thomp-thomp-thomp. Sudden, loud banging at the door. She almost sticks her mascara wand in her eye.

"Open up, open up. It's Sergeant Fritz van der Merwe from the Point Police Station. We've had a report you are harbouring illegal substances in there. *Dwelms*! Open the door, *meneer*. We have a warrant."

"My god! Luke!"

"It's just Shovel, pulling our legs," he laughs, zipping up his pants and heading for the front door. "Sorry who did you say it was? Sergeant who?" he shouts across the flat.

"Sergeant Frikkie van der Merwe. Open up!"

The door is flung open. She hears laughter and backslapping.

"Barrington Lovell, you filthy Shovel!"

"Hah, got you there Webster!"

"Nah! Not a chance. What was it; Fritz? Frikkie? Fanie? Come on! Get your story straight. You'll have to do a bit better than that."

"Yah, just you wait... Where's Charlotte?"

"Getting ready."

"Feel like a little smoke before the movie. I got some pot from a guy at work. Want to smoke some?"

"Maybe later."

"Christ, it's hot tonight."

Their voices grow distant as they move outside, echoing faintly along the red polished corridor. They're probably leaning against the balcony wall, acting like two *brekers*, she thinks... Rebels Without a Cause. But we'll find our causes, no doubt.

So, 2001... My god, how will that be? Let's see ... 1968 to 2001 ... minus forty ... no thirty -- plus two, plus one. Thirty-three years from now! Twenty-nine and thirty-three. In 2001 I'll be sixty-two years old! Will my breasts shrink? Flesh fall soft? My children will be grown up by then. They'll be my age now. So many years between now and then. So many years in which to maintain the equilibrium - keep things from spinning out of control. What tragedies could befall us? Everyone gets their dose of something. No Charlotte, don't be gloomy now. Never mind. We'll cope. I've got the love, she thinks. Oh yes, I've got an abundance of that. A whole sea of it, as wide and wet as the Indian Ocean. If love's what it takes... She saunters over to the built in cupboard and slips her small feet into a pair of black high heels.

How will the world be then? My parents gone. No, don't think of that. They survived the war and they're still here, bossing me about. What will change things as much as cars or electricity -- or the war, god forbid? What big thing? What invention? Life on other planets? Holidays on the moon. Imagine, cheap oxygen kits for your moon safari. That wouldn't be half bad; safaris on the moon. Such odd things, safaris. Even here on earth, they're strange. She remembers the trip with Bob and Audrey to Hluluwe, Matubatuba and Saint Lucia Bay in Zululand. Why are safari suits so damned popular here in South Africa? They're extremely unattractive -- with those long khaki socks. Heavens, you can almost tell who drinks Brandy and Coke and votes Nat just by the length of their socks. How silly men look in short pants, like overgrown boys with hairy legs. Makes a kind of sense out there in the bush - ticks and all -- but it's somehow inappropriate here in the city. And then, in the wilderness, things are made so bizarrely formal. African rangers in khaki suits with lapels and badges needing cash, addresses and signatures before they're permitted to lift the boom so the car can drive through into the game park. Mad systems of rank amidst the lions.

On her dressing table next to a bottle of *Dioressence* perfume are a few photographs in silver frames: her mother and father wearing silly outfits for a fancy dress party on the ship that brought them over here. Her father is wearing a giant top hat like the mad hatter in *Alice and Wonderland*. There is a bunch of balloons in the background.

They look so much younger there, she thinks, picking up another picture alongside the one of her parents. It is a black and white photograph of her and her sister, Audrey, standing on a rocky slope amidst tall grasses. They are wearing scarves and sunglasses. There is a zebra in the background... "Gosh," she says out loud, slightly startled by the sound of her own voice in the empty bedroom. Who would have thought I'd end up in Africa? How absurd! Might as well have been another planet, really. Earth to Moon: Devon to Durban. Not in her wildest dreams.

As a child walking around the British Museum with her father (he showed her the love letters between Napoleon and Josephine), she could never ever have guessed that she'd end up here on the southern tip of the 'Dark Continent'.

Zulus and lions... How silly! That's all they tell you about in old Blighty. They think everyone in Africa still lives in mud huts. But it's not really like that at all. It's not really that dark and dangerous. Perfectly safe, really. And so much warmer. Not at all how I'd imagined it. Even the way they say "Zulu" back in England is sort of ridiculous: "Zoohloo" with a cockney twang -- "Zoooohloo".

Shortly after the end of the war, her father, Frederick James Summerson, made the decision to sell Higher Manor Farm on the coast of Devon, which had provided them with shelter while London was being bombed to smithereens. He decided to resettle in South Africa where they could make a fresh start of it. Fred had grown up dirt poor. His father worked for the London municipality, but, during his young adult years in London, Fred had been trained in real estate and property dealing. A Jewish businessman had taken him under his wing and imparted the crucial tenets of his financial savvy and worldly wisdom. Fred was so in awe of his mentor,

he learned Yiddish in his honour. From that point on he was determined to be rich, and South Africa was the place that was going to make it happen for him. But he didn't *just* want to be rich, he wanted to be powerful too. He wanted to be the *Ganza Macha* – the patriarch, the godfather to whom all were answerable, to whom all turned for advice and permission. Other people could be bosses, but Fred was going to be the big boss, the ruler of a family empire on the South Eastern shore of Africa. By the time Charlotte matriculated from Durban Girls High School, Fred owned a number of commercial properties in the city. Three of them were hotels: The Roydon, The Sea Breeze and The Blenheim.

Despite their intelligence and outspokenness, going to university was never an option for Charlotte or her younger sister, Audrey. That privilege was reserved for their big brother, Robert. She remembers a brief conversation about it once, her father standing in the lounge with his whisky on ice under the boldly framed print of an oil painting of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. But the conversation didn't last long. At a certain point he simply sauntered over to the record player and moved the needle gently onto the black vinyl sphere. Her voice was quickly drowned out by the sound of Arturo Toscanini conducting Puccini's *La Boheme*.

"Listen to this, Charlotte," he yelled above the music. "It's Toscanini inspired by the third movement of Beethoven's *Ninth*. Now this is music. Music to lift you off the earth, to remove you from the field of gravity. So suberbly weightless!"

"But Daddy, I don't see why, just because I'm a girl, I can't go to university. It's not at all fair."

"'What do you see when you hear this music, Charlotte? I see extremely bright lights far, far away, I see shadows moving around, I see flowers of the most charming shapes and colours. Now that, my girl, is genius. Sheer genius!" And that was the end of the conversation.

"Okay, so we'll meet you down in the lobby in 20 minutes," she hears Barry saying. Then, rising up from the echoey stairwell: "2001! Into the next frontier!" in a fake American accent. Luke returns, smiling. His hot presence fills up the room.

"Did I hear Barry say 'pot'?" she says.

"He offered, but I'm not really interested in that stuff. Makes you stupid and lazy."

"Mmmmmm... Is that so?" she says in a fancy pants way.

"Yes, that is so."

"Ah ha!" she says, standing and walking slowly towards him. "Well, Mr Webster, I was just wondering what it might be that you are truly interested in?"

"Well, Mrs Webster," he responds. He takes a loose lock of her thick blonde hair and folds it in behind her ear, running his fingers between her bra strap and her pale English skin. "Let me show you exactly what I'm interested in." He pulls her towards him and holds her there, pressing into her. He mumbles gruffly into her ear and she feels herself growing taller with desire, muscles stretching out in the delicious heat radiating from him. She is amazed again at the heat he contains. His skin is always so hot. He shines. He is her hot sun. Just 20 minutes, 20 minutes in orbit.

They tumble onto the bed and when she closes her eyes, everything seems to be spinning and whirling about her. As Luke enters the darkness inside her she feels as if she holds within her the eternity of the night sky. She imagines billions of suns burning away, galaxies of planets eternally wandering around the radiant light of their suns. And somewhere in the deep whirling spunk of outer space a small tribe of like-minded atoms is searching for a home.

BIRTH

Alice Jane Webster was born in a room on the east wing of Saint Augustine's hospital in Durban early one morning in August 1969. Her first cry almost deafened a pretty young nurse who had momentarily lost interest in the procedure and was staring out to sea contemplating last night's date.

It was one month after the moon landing, and Alice's father was filled with a marvellous breathtaking sense of the potentiality in all things. As he held his daughter in his arms for the first time, he whispered splendid nonsense into her tiny pink ears and fantasised about keeping her in a transparent pod for the first six months of her life, playing her Bach and recordings of Einstein's Theory of Relativity. Luke Webster fancied himself as a man of the moment and he wanted his child to be a modern superstar, a genius and a diva. Driven by a unique combination of whimsy and ambition, he was, shall we say, a dreamer of the first order.

"Let's call her Alice," he said, pacing about the hospital room, trying to contain his multiplying energy. "After Alice in Wonderland."

Charlotte's pale blue eyes lazily traced his movement and, when he finally sat down on the edge of her bed, she gazed at him with a glazed smile. She felt exhausted, elated and daunted all at once -- like she'd just landed on the moon. Nothing on earth could have prepared her for the weight she felt holding this small child in her arms.

She couldn't seem to work out if this was an end or a beginning for her.

CLIMBING UPSTAIRS SLOWLY

Alice Webster was blessed with a happy childhood. Her parents were still deeply, physically in love and their love was like a giant wave advancing towards the golden shore. It built to a wild, ecstatic height before folding thunderously in upon itself, transforming into a million soft bubbles all about her. As a young child, Alice was filled with wonder.

Entranced by delicate miracles like seashells, baby birds and moss, she was often lost in the quiet world of her own imaginings. On Sundays her father would wake she and her brother before sunrise when it was dark and quiet. Before they had a chance to wipe the sleep from their eyes or brush their hair, they'd be squeezed into the hatchback of his E-Type Jaguar, speeding into the darkness, destination unknown. These trips were known as 'jollies' and, although they were always back in time for Sunday breakfast, while they were gone they seemed to journey great distances into unknown worlds. On their jollies, Alice's father would ask her and brother impossible questions they never knew the answers to.

"How many sand grains do you think there are in the world?"

"What lies out there on the other side of the sky?"

Inspired by racing drivers with exotic-sounding names, like Emerson Fittipaldi, he would drive way too fast and end up getting a whopping speeding fine from a hulk of a man in an ugly uniform. Alice didn't like the way those men with moustaches spoke to her father, who was always cheerful in a way that seemed to make them angry.

"You stay here kids. I'll be back in a tick," her father would say, climbing out of the driver's seat. Alice would lie there breathless in the back of the car, terrified that her father would be taken away by the men in uniforms and that she and her brother would be left on the side of the road in their pyjamas and anoraks.

But no matter how many fines those policemen issued, they never managed to put an end to Alice's father's Le Mans fantasy, which was second only to his passion for amateur

filmmaking. His Super 8 camera went everywhere with them, from the Valley of a Thousand Hills to Mahatma Ghandi's house in the sugar cane fields. While Alice's little brother built castles in the sand on Shongweni Beach, her father walked backwards, tripping over rocks, in his attempt to capture on celluloid whatever discoveries they happened to stumble upon: a sunrise, a strange flower, a dead shark.

Back at Dronfield Road, these images would be spliced together into fantastic epics and screened on a sheet in the lounge to the orchestral soundtrack of Concierto de Aranjuez on his record player. With his state-of-the-art editing machine, Alice's father was capable of achieving the same signature effects that defined the Seventies hallucinogenic drug movie. One dead shark became 40 dead sharks circling round and round in centrifugal motion then fading, soft focus, into a burning orange sunrise. Alice didn't know if it was just the music, but the images on the sheet made her sad. Those moments had passed. They could never go back to them.

When she was five, her family moved away from the modest tin-roofed house on Dronfield Road to a double-storey mansion in Durban North with a garden that was almost as big as a park. Alice didn't want to go. Durban North felt so far away and the scale of the new house scared her. She was unnerved by the amount of space that lay between things. So much room to get lost in. In the Durban North house all the bedrooms were upstairs and it was Alice's turn to go up first in the evenings, to bath and get ready for supper.

She would climb up the stairs slowly, starting with one step at a time, but about half way up she became conscious of the curse. If she didn't take two steps at a time, something dreadful could happen. She couldn't say exactly what, but she knew the consequences of her transgression would be somehow awful. As she turned the corner in the staircase for the final ascent, she'd have to add one stair to each step she made, so that by the time she reached the top, she was

climbing up four stairs at once, clinging to the wooden railing in order to make it. When she got to the top she faced a long, dark corridor with bedrooms and bathrooms leading off of it.

Alice had another strategy for this darkness. She'd take a deep breath and run along the passageway, slapping the light switches on as she went. She'd start with her parents bedroom on the right and dash the whole way down, with arms outstretched so that she could turn on the switches on either side of her without having to slow down or stop. Once she reached her brother's room at the end of the passageway and the entire upper storey of the house was illuminated, she'd start to feel a little safer. A little more confident.

But the fear was not gone. There was still the possibility of something hiding in the cupboards and beneath the beds. Alice was never quite sure what it was that could be hiding. A monster? A being? A dark force? All she knew was that she had to make sure there was nothing there. She'd return to the top of the stairs to begin her breathless journey along the passageway once more, this time entering each room to make sure the cupboards were storing nothing but clothes. Only once she'd reached the end of the corridor could she start running her bath. Never before then. Who knows what sounds the running bath water could conceal?

Alice was about eight when she started to fear death. Despite herself, she'd close her eyes and force herself to imagine what it was like not to exist. It made her feel sick – a shaky, hot, pathetic nausea. She never told anybody about it. It was a private fear. A dark and shocking fact that gnawed away at her in the darkness. It was something she could forget about during the day. But after her parents had kissed her goodnight and she was lying in bed trying to get to sleep, the fear would surface again.

She seemed to have some knowledge that she wasn't supposed to have. She wished it would go away. Each time she did it -- closed her eyes and imagined herself into nothingness -- it was in the hope that this time it wouldn't be possible. That death would be something she simply couldn't imagine, but to her horror, she always could. She could imagine just what it was like to be dead. To cease to exist. To have nothing and be nothing. To think nothing. Feel nothing. To

matter to nobody. Forever and ever. She could only imagine it for about a second or two, but that was enough to scare her terrifically. She'd lie there forcing herself to think of lovely, alive things until she'd lost the bad feeling and could finally fall asleep. The fear stayed with Alice as she grew older.

One day, when she was about 10, her father read to her from a book called the *Rubáiyát of Omar of Khayyám*. It was an old book with fantastical pictures in it that reminded her of the ivory inlays in the cherry wood Indian table that sat in the centre of the lounge.

"I've had this book since I was a law student in Zambia," he told her. "I suppose it's a bit like a Bible to me. It's taught me a lot about what it means to be alive."

Alice loved books and wanted very much to enjoy the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* as much as she enjoyed it when her father read Roald Dahl or Herman Charles Bosman to the family on Sunday nights. After the listening to crackly broadcasts of *Check Your Mate* and the *Three Wise Men* on Radio South Africa, the whole family would climb into Alice's parents' king-sized bed and listen to stories until they fell asleep. Then she and her brother would be carried off to bed in their own rooms. But Alice always tried to keep her eyes open for as long as possible. She felt happiest when she was lying between her parents listening to her father read Herman Charles Bosman stories in a funny Afrikaans accent. But she could tell from his tone that *the Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* was not a funny book.

"The poems were originally written by a Persian poet-philosopher called Omar Khayyám in about AD 1460," said her father. "He must have been a brilliant man, old Omar. He wrote all about his life and experiences, but never intended the book to be published. It was like his private diary."

"I'd hate somebody to publish my diary," said Alice.

"But this is different. This knowledge was destined to be shared with the world. When Omar first wrote it all those years ago, he wrote it in purple ink on yellow paper, powdered in gold. For centuries it was lost to the world. Then an English chap called Cowell discovered it

among a dusty old pile of uncatalogued material in a library in Oxford. Sometime around the middle of last century a man called Edward Fitzgerald translated it into English for us. And a damn fine job he did too." Whenever he got poetic, her father's accent got smarter and more English. Alice could tell by the way he was suddenly rounding his vowels and speaking as if the queen was coming for tea that this poetry was serious stuff.

"But what's it about?" she asked.

"Oh, it's about love and wine and life and death," said her father. But the moment she heard the word 'death', Alice's stomach tightened. She didn't like the sound of that at all.

"Listen to this," he said, clearing his throat. "Splendid stuff!"

'Awake!' he bellowed, 'for morning in the bowl of night

Has flung the stone that puts the stars to flight:

And Lo! the Hunter of the Night has caught

The sultan's turret in a noose of light.

'Dreaming when dawn's left hand was in the sky

I heard a voice within the tavern cry,

"Awake, my little ones, fill the cup

Before life's liquor in its cup be dry."'

"But hang on," he said, interrupting himself in the height of poetic rapture. "You can read this part yourself. It's the part about the potter that I love." And he proceeded to page through the book with its images of minarets and white horses, bearded men in fezzes and sultans making imploring gestures towards the night sky.

"Oh yes, this is the bit," he said. "This is one of the parts I love:

'Ah, fill the cup:- what boots it to repeat

How time is slipping underneath our feet:

Unborn tomorrow, and dead yesterday,

Why fret about them if today be sweet!"

"One moment in annihilation's waste,

One moment, of the well of life to taste –

The stars are setting and the caravan

Starts for the dawn of nothing – Oh make haste!"

As her father read on, Alice was suddenly overcome by that familiar quiet nausea.

"Beautiful," she lied to her father. "But I better get on with my homework now." All this talk of the "dawn of nothing" and "annihilation's waste" had filled her with unspeakable dread.

"How can you even think of homework now? Are you listening at all? It's all about grabbing the moment. Not letting things slip away from you. Living to the full. And all you can think about is your homework."

"I have been listening. It's just not my sort of thing," she mumbled.

"I can't believe you, Alice. A Romantic like you, I thought you'd love the Rubáiyát. It's such a potent celebration of life."

"I suppose," she said flatly, wishing she could see it that way. She longed for the feeling to disappear.

"I tell you what," said her flummoxed father. "I'm going to give you my copy. You don't have to read it now. But maybe one day, you'll pick it up and things will be different. Maybe in the future it'll make some sense to you."

"Maybe," she said. She never told her father how much that book scared her. It stayed on her bookshelf for year after year. Alice tried to ignore it, but she always knew it was there, waiting for her. She just couldn't bring herself to open it. She wasn't ready for the knowledge it held until later. Much later...

KILLING ME SOFTLY

Never underestimate the impact a lowly Greek restaurant can have on your existence. For Alice Webster it was one particular Greek restaurant not far from the Golden Mile of plastic Seventies tourist wonderland known as the Marine Parade, that ran along the city shoreline in Durban where she grew up. It seemed she was there every other Sunday of her childhood at a huge table with aunts, uncles, cousins and one or two of her parents' rowdy friends – all under the illusion that, after a bottle of dry white, they were in fact Greek.

Alice's mother, in a remarkable triumph over Waspish restraint, actually succeeded in turning into a Greek in the late afternoon – smashing one-rand-a-shot unglazed ceramic plates and yelling "whoopla" like there was no tomorrow. Alice didn't get it -- which might have had something to do with being sober or being 14. Either way, her mother's exuberance was like the curse of the 'dreaded lurgi' on her early adolescent aspiration to be like everybody else.

For as long as Alice could remember, there had always been a restaurant with crisp white tablecloths and Julio Iglesias or some other Latin Casanova setting the mood. If it wasn't Greek, it was Portuguese and if it wasn't Portuguese, it was Italian.

Alice's parents worked hard during the week, keeping the family's small group of low-tariff hotels running.

"Keeping 460 bums in beds is no mean feat," Luke Webster would declare. The sight of her father's sweaty brow or her mother's callused feet was not a rare one.

But when they weren't slaving away at the hotels, they made up for it. They liked to get together with the rest of the family to eat and drink. She remembers her mother's big breasts and her rich laugh as she washes her hands in a bowl of hot lemon water having devoured a plateful of garlic prawns. Doubting nothing this Sunday afternoon, Charlotte exclaims something in French that nobody understands.

"Et pour quoi pas? Et pour quoi pas?"

"Those Australian surfers have booked out the entire ground floor of the Blenheim for the Gunston 500," Alice's father proudly announces. A full hotel was always reason to celebrate.

"You must watch those buggers from Down Under," her uncle Mike retorts. "We had them at the Sea Breeze last year. All their talk of big waves and hot chicks in bikinis -- we should have known better. Of course they turned out to be real animals. Trashed the place. We had to boot them out. Still got a bloody surfboard in my office."

Alice quickly loses track of the adults' conversation. She's with her cousins and happy for that. They can order ice cream and chocolate sauce, even though they're full to bursting. Her beautiful, strange brother, Ben, has spilt his Fanta on the linen tablecloth again and the Indian waiter called George has assured everybody it's fine as he refills the adults' glasses.

Alice's uncle, Barry, likes to tell dirty jokes and her aunt, Heather, has modern, bright earrings on. Heather's love for these family lunches in continental restaurants is gleaming through her tanned skin and sparkling from the rings on her thin hands. Tracy has just started wearing lipstick. It's an odd orange colour, but she's so glamorous, she could be the prettiest girl in the whole wide world.

They were all so important then – so perfectly placed on God's time line. Nothing out of place. Alice's family made the world feel like a grand and golden place to be. Like theirs was the prized table at the restaurant -- always large and round, with enough space for everybody.

The rock at the centre of this turning world was Alice's mother, Charlotte.

Charlotte Webster (nee Summerson) was a big, elegant woman who liked to tell the truth no matter what the consequences. As she grew older, wine and truth became the substances that ruled her nights.

With a rumbling late-20th-century appetite for expansion, Luke started pulling out of the day-to-day running of the family hotels and focusing his attention on property development: a high rise apartment block on the Berea; a shopping centre and entertainment complex on the beach front... Charlotte resented his hunger for power as much as he resented her dress size.

She'd grown larger since their wedding day when she still was capable of squeezing into a size 34. Her body seemed to expand in an effort to contain her frustrated spirit.

"The point is," she said to her husband Luke's business partner, as she dished the peas onto his plate. "You're a liar and you're only in it for you and yours. You've been crooking the books and you think we're too stupid to pick it up."

The evening began well. She'd been polite and genteel, the perfect Durban North hostess. But two glasses of red later, she simply couldn't contain herself. The truth was like a monster inside her, struggling violently to reach the light.

"Charlotte!" her husband would say, trying to hide his embarrassment, "You don't know what on earth you're talking about. You're not on top of the facts. Do forgive my wife, Ronald."

"Forgive me?" she'd declare, her words rising, round and deep, from the base of her solarplexus. "I am innocent. It is your arse-licking colleague who should be begging your forgiveness. You're just too bound up in your own ego to notice."

Alice and her brother Ben would be sitting at the table, quietly, pretending not to be there. Nothing was beyond the bounds of utterance for their mother.

"For Christ's sake, Charlotte, mind your language in front of the kids. Seriously, Ronald, don't let it get to you. When Charlotte gets a bee in her bonnet there's no holding her back. How do you like your meat? Rare or well done?"

"What's your star sign, Ronald? That's what I'd like to know," she'd declare, undeterred by her husband's attempts to re-establish an air of propriety. "Not a Scorpio that's for sure. I'll take you any bet you're a bloody Aquarian. Never sure which side of the bread you're buttering."

"Well," the affronted Ronald would mumble, "I am in fact. How did you know that?"

"I just know. Like I know you're crooking the books!"

For Alice's sixteenth birthday, her mother booked a table at La Dolce Vita, an Italian restaurant on Gillespie Street. Because the restaurant was beneath The Wavecrest - the block of

holiday flats her parents ran -- they had a good relationship with the owner, Gino, who spent his life toiling away in service of the gods Bacchus and Dionysus.

When they arrived, Gino, greeted the Websters as if they were his long lost Italian cousins. Alice's parents liked to feel important. More crucially, they liked to feel like Italians, Greeks or Spaniards. Both of them were in staunch denial of their wishy-washy Anglo Protestant roots. So they loved it when Gino greeted them with open arms and ushered them to the large table in the centre of the restaurant.

At 16, Alice was excruciatingly self-conscious. Her mother's Latin boldness made her feel taut and terribly English. She would have far preferred to have entered the restaurant discreetly and been ushered to a small table in the corner. But Charlotte Webster was having none of it. Her daughter's birthday was something to be celebrated with gusto.

"Bring starters and bread for the table, Gino. It's my daughter's sixteenth birthday," she declared.

"Ah, I see," replied the middle-aged Italian stallion, "Sweet sixteen and never been kissed." Alice could feel her ears turning bright red, foiling any attempt at mysteriousness.

"Let's start with a bottle of Frascati," said her father. "And what would you two girls like to drink?"

"Wine of course!" said Vanessa. Alice's brother was away at boarding school, so she'd brought along her outspoken best friend. Thankfully Vanessa's parents were also party animals. Her father was big on the horses and had an expense account at the Wild Coast Casino, so Vanessa was used to adults who liked to live big. In fact she rather fancied herself as an adult already. At sixteen years old, she was beautiful, precocious and could keep her end up in a feisty debate with Alice's parents. She was in the Debating Society at school and liked to be third speaker, so she could go for the jugular when the debate was opened to the floor.

This appealed no end to Alice's father, who had studied law before going into the family hotel business. He was a member of Toastmasters and a great fan of public speaking. On

Saturday nights, when Alice's cousins were spending the night, he would send them away from the dinner table with two minutes to prepare to speak on any declared topic from paper clips to racoons.

Luke Webster's machismo had gone rampant when he entered his forties, so it pleased him greatly to have a 16-year-old, loudmouth beauty at his table, even if she was his daughter's school friend. He liked to be surrounded by remarkable things.

It suited Alice to have a friend like Vanessa who could put up with any eventuality. This was part of the unspoken pact at the heart of their friendship. Both of them could handle each other's parents' antics, no matter how out of hand they got. Alice had witnessed Vanessa's mother doing a Rod Stewart impersonation while standing on the glass dining room table, the music going full blast at Volume 22, before passing out on Valium.

But for now, Alice was quietly praying that this evening would go smoothly. As Vanessa entered into an argument with Luke and Charlotte as to whether the Durban beach front should be pedestrianised, Alice took a sip of Appletiser and listened. All seemed to go well until the main course was done and her parents were ordering Cognacs. That's when her mother suddenly came to life.

"Gino," she shouted, as the restaurant owner walked off with their drinks order, "Bring us some charcoal. It is time for my daughter to sign her name on your wall." The walls of the restaurant were covered in the signatures of celebrities and big wigs who'd had a good time at La Dolce Vita.

"No, it's okay Gino, don't worry," said Alice politely, secretly wishing she could crawl under the table and disappear.

"Gino, some charcoal please!"

"But of course, Mrs Webster," said Gino, hovering awkwardly in the space between their table and the pizza oven. "Of course she must sign her name of the wall of La Dolce Vita. Sweet sixteen. It is time."

"Please Mummy," said Alice quietly, between her teeth. "I really don't want to sign my name. I'm fine as I am."

"Don't be ridiculous! Have some spirit. I have brought along your horoscope sign. You can draw it on the wall."

"Oh no, I don't believe it."

"Believe it, Sarah Bernhardt. Don't be such a stick in the mud."

"Go on, Alice," said Vanessa, "it's not such a big deal."

The next thing, Alice was standing on a chair in the middle of the packed restaurant signing her astrological sign on the wall while the entire place sang Happy Birthday to her in 10 different keys. Her mother was right about one thing. Like Sarah Bernhardt, she wouldn't have minded sinking into her own satin-lined coffin and shutting the lid on the world.

Alice hoped that by making her mark on the wall, she would succeed in pacifying her mother, but no such luck. As soon as she'd regained her normal heart rate, an old black man set up a chair and standing microphone in the corner of the restaurant. He struck up on his guitar and began to sing a gentle rendition of *You've Got a Friend.*

"Winter, spring, summer or fa-all, all you have to do is ca-all and I'll be there. Oh yes I will, 'cos you got a friend..."

The guy had a Sammy Davis Jr. kind of look. Life had left its marks on him, but he was singing in the face of his troubles. Charlotte felt she had a kind of shared knowledge with the music man and this gave her a red-blooded, wine-warmed thrill. He hadn't got beyond the first line of the next song when she started shouting out: "*Killing Me Softly*! *Killing Me Softly*!"

A woman at the next table, with neat hair and a cardigan, turned to face their table and gave Alice's mother a disapproving scowl. But Charlotte had a comrade in the music man and before she could say another word, he began to sing:

"I heard he sang a good song, I heard he had a style.
And so I came to see him to listen for a while.
And there he was this young boy, a stranger to my eyes.

"Strumming my pain with his fingers,
singing my life with his words,
killing me softly with his song,
killing me softly with his song,
telling my whole life with his words,
killing me softly with his song..."

When the song ended and all the people in the restaurant broke into a loud round of applause, Alice looked at Charlotte in an attempt to fathom her next move. But her mother wasn't clapping. She was crying.

"*Encore*!" she said to the music man proudly, as if nobody had noticed her tears. She did not try to wipe them away. "*La même chose.* Play it again, Sam."

"Thank you lovely lady, thank you very much. Yep, it's a special tune that -- first hit the airwaves in 1973... Roberta Flack - a true empress of song," and he struck up again on his guitar with an upbeat number by Gladys Knight, politely averting the call for an encore.

Alice couldn't understand what had suddenly made her mother so very sad. She felt guilty. She wanted to get up on the table and write a poem for her in charcoal on the wall, but it was too late. Her father paid the bill and they quietly exited La Dolce Vita.

TANGERINE QUEEN

When Alice's mother wasn't working or smashing plates, she'd spend hours sitting in an armchair in the corner of the lounge waiting for her husband to come home. Sometimes she would read, but mostly she'd just think. She seemed to have a lot to think about. Alice longed for the times when her mother would stop thinking and talk.

One night, sitting in the golden light of the large lamp in the corner of the lounge, she started to tell Alice stories about her childhood. She'd never spoken about it before. She told her about the village of Ringmore and the Journey's End Inn where her father used to drink his pints and exchange news with the villagers and other farmers in the area.

Alice always thought of farms as being inland places, but the farm her mother grew up on was by the sea. In the summertime, Charlotte's family would walk down the valley and follow a path along the seaside for picnics at Ayrmer Cove. Her mother, Violet, would lay out a big blue blanket for the family and sit with her skirt pulled up over her knees and her pale legs stretched out in the sunshine. Charlotte and Robert would run on the beach and play conkers with fallen acorns on pieces of string, while Fred and Violet, drank cider, and ate ham and mustard sandwiches.

Fred had bought Higher Manor Farm on the coast of Devon some years before the war started, when it was a just derelict piece of land. With the determination that later made him such a stubborn old man, he quickly turned it into a showpiece. When the war broke out, he was seen as providing an essential service to the home country and was never conscripted.

"The blackouts were endless," said Alice's mother, her eyes fixed on an invisible point in the middle distance. "Sometimes it seemed as if we'd be stuck there in the darkness forever."

"What's a blackout?" asked Alice, hanging on her mother's every word.

"The blackouts used to happen during German air raids. When the bomber planes were overhead, we'd have to run inside. We would draw the curtains and hide. My mother had to sew special black curtains especially for the raids."

"Ugh, black curtains."

"That was the least of it. One time Bob and I were in the fields with Daddy and a German spitfire opened fire on us from above."

"Jeepers!"

"The Germans riddled that field with gunfire. We had to run for our lives. We ran under the oaks at the side of the field and hid there until the plane took off back to Germany."

"Gee, those Germans were dogs," said Alice in sympathy for what her mother had been through.

"No they weren't," said her mother, abruptly. "Well, not all of them, in any case. History is not that simple, Alice. Everyday people get caught up in things that are much bigger than themselves. History is capable of swallowing us up."

"But I don't see how you can be so nice about the Germans when they were the ones dropping bombs on your heads."

"It's not always so simple," said her mother, sadly. "I remember there were these two German prisoners of war working on our farm."

"You mean they were from the enemy? Weren't you scared of them?"

"Not at all. They were the gentlest souls imaginable. They were my friends. They even carved a wooden duck on wheels for me once. The poor sods were trapped in England miles and miles away from their wives and children back in Germany. They had no choice in the matter. No choice whatsoever."

As she spoke, Alice's mother became somebody entirely different in Alice's eyes. All her treacherous daily flaws seemed to fade away in the light of her courageous youth. Now Alice

could forgive her for the fact that she never baked chocolate cakes for netball matches and was a less than committed member of the lift club. All the other mothers arrived on time to collect the girls from school. Alice had always wanted her mother to be more like Nicky Laroque's mother. Mrs Laroque was slim and sedate. She spoke quietly and brought Liqui Fruits with little bendable straws for all the girls in the lift club when she fetched them from school. She always had her poodle with her. But now Mrs Laroque was fading into obscurity, as her own mother's heroism took centre stage.

Her mother told her that in England they called naartjies "tangerines", and that the smell of tangerines reminded her of Christmas. During the war, they'd get fresh tangerines in their Christmas stockings and there was no better treat. Alice tried to imagine feeling so excited about naartjies. This gave her a weird sense of how lousy the war must have been.

"But those blackouts were something," said her mother, turning one of her rings around and around on her finger. "The whole family would have to hide together under the giant oak table until we got the all clear."

"All of you? Fred and Nana, you, Bob and Audrey?"

"Well, no," said her mother, slightly irritated by the distraction. "Audrey wasn't born yet. She came later."

Alice tried to feel the terror, to imagine the blast of sirens screaming through the air, but another thought kept interfering -- the thought of how close her mother's family must have felt under the old oak kitchen table. Alice secretly longed for the intimacy of those extended minutes while they were all forced so close together by the Germans flying overhead.

"What else?" asked Alice.

"Well," said her mother. "I could have ended up being the English Shirley Temple if it weren't for my bloody father."

"Who's Shirley Temple?"

"You mean you don't know? Heavens, Shirley Temple was the most adored child star of the Thirties. She was everybody's dream of perfect prettiness and innocence."

"But what did you have to do with Shirley Temple and what did she have to do with the war?"

"Well, not much to do with the war exactly. More the Depression really."

"I don't understand."

"Shirley Temple was in this movie called *Stand Up and Cheer* and, when the whole of America was down in the dumps, her smiling face made people forget all about their troubles. She had the cutest dimples and she could really dance -- even though she was only six years old."

"Wow."

"Anyway, during the war, Fred joined the film corps. He acted in so many different movies, we could hardly keep up. The photographs were hilarious."

"I didn't know you had movies and photos back then."

"For god's sake, Alice, I'm not *that* old. Anyway, in one photo he was an RAF pilot, in another he was a gunner in an artillery unit. In the next he was a colonel on the front line. After the war, he'd love showing off the photos to people in the pub – just to see their reactions. 'Heavens, you've had quite an amazing military career,' they'd say, awestruck by the fact that he was still around to tell the tale. Then Fred would crack up laughing and tell them about his part-time film career."

"But I don't see what Fred's army movies have to do with Shirley Temple."

"Well, sometime during the war, they decided they wanted to create a British Shirley Temple. If she could cheer up the Depression-era Americans maybe she could cheer up the English while the Germans were busy destroying London."

"Oh-h, I get it."

"So when one of Fred's film friends spotted me, he thought I'd be perfect as the British Shirley Temple. I had the blonde hair, the big blue eyes and the little round pink cheeks. He thought I was the prettiest little thing he'd ever seen."

"Gee," said Alice, struggling to picture her mother as a sparkling child starlet in tap dancing shoes.

"But Daddy wasn't having any of it. He refused out right. He said he wasn't having any daughter of his turned into a kitsch American fantasy."

"But how could he do that? You could be famous today."

"I could be famous and I could be educated. But you know your grandfather. When he's made up his mind he's made up his mind."

"But, what did Nana say?"

"Nana said nothing. She was too busy baking rabbit pie."

"Rabbit pie?"

"Violet had about 101 recipes for rabbit. It was just about the only meat that wasn't restricted during the war and she had plenty of mouths to feed."

"Ugh, how could you eat rabbit?"

"We jolly well had to. Myself and all the other children. There were always lots of children staying on the farm."

"Where were their parents?"

"Their fathers were fighting and their mothers - getting on with it in London, I suppose. The children used to get shipped out of the city to farms like ours so they'd be safe from the bombs being dropped on London by the Germans."

"Bombs! I can't even imagine how scary it must have been."

"One weekend we went on a trip with Daddy to Plymouth in the old truck. We were going to collect some furniture he had bought for the farmhouse. But when we got there he couldn't find the street, let alone the building. They had bombed the hell out of Plymouth."

Alice tried to get her mother to speak about the war again on other nights, but she never would. "There's no point in dwelling on the past," she'd say. "Now is the moment."

"But what about the past?" Alice asked. "I want to know more about the way things used to be."

"The past is history," said her mother. "It's now that matters."

But Alice wasn't entirely convinced. The past seemed to be something that mattered in a completely different way. And what if her mother's past mattered to her more than she did? Suddenly her mother seemed a bit like a stranger to her. Alice felt like she'd lost and found something all at once. There was more to her mother now. She must have lived a whole other life before her family had come along. For the first time Alice started to understand that Charlotte was something more than her mother, more than the solid person at the centre of the Webster family. The one who picked up the socks and panties lying around on the bathroom floor and made sure there were yoghurts in the fridge and Bakers assorted biscuits in the cupboards. There were mysteries about her. Things she had experienced but never spoken about.

If she could remain silent about something as big as the war, what other secrets was she holding inside her?

ONWARD CHRISTIAN SOLDIERS

The note was passed from girl to girl along the rows of wooden school desks until it reached Alice, who was in a window seat, as usual, staring out at the still suburban world and wondering how it would feel to be free on a hot Wednesday afternoon in May.

"Psssst," whispered Fiona Buckland from the desk behind her, jabbing Alice in the shoulder with an HB pencil. "Note for you." Alice pretended to stretch, raising her arms above her head and letting them fall down behind her neck so that Fiona could place the tiny piece of folded paper in her hands.

"But when the Boers got to Blood River in northern Natal," whined the history teacher in a high-pitched nasal drawl, "it was their turn for victory. Together, they built an impenetrable circle with their ox wagons that was to act as their fortress. Now, can anyone tell me what that fortress of wagons was called?" Jodi Cunningham had her hand up first as usual.

"Yes, Jodi?"

"A laager."

"Yes, exactly. A laager. The Boers created a laager for themselves to fight off the Zulus at Blood River."

Opening the note on her lap under the desk, Alice could see it was written in neat, bold handwriting. The dots on the i's had little smiley faces on them, which infuriated Alice before she even had a chance to read the words:

"Dear Alice,

We miss you at Pulse on Friday nights. Don't try to fight it. Jesus loves you.

Peace and love,

Belinda."

Alice scrunched up the piece of paper, lifted the lid of the desk slightly and threw the note into the dark cavern within.

"Hell has no mercy," she muttered to herself, beneath her breath. It was about the fifth note she'd received this week. The first one was an invitation to join Sally King's prayer group at lunch break. The second was to attend a Bible reading after school in Mrs Van der Stel's classroom... And now there was this one trying to get her to come to the local Christian youth group on Friday nights.

The craze had started about two months into standard seven, when Alice was thirteen. By winter of the same year, before she'd even turned fourteen, it seemed like the whole of Northlands Girls High School had turned Christian. All the girls from standard six through to matric were caught in an ecstatic tidal wave of giggly, elated conversions. Fish stickers and cheap Bibles were in sudden abundance, as even the most sober of Alice's friends startlingly confessed to having spoken in tongues on Friday night at Pulse. The only tongue action Alice could imagine was her friend Geraldine's tongue in Bradley Smith's mouth, French kissing up a storm in the bushes behind the church.

This Christian wave would never have happened in senior primary school when the boys were in the same school as us, Alice fumed. But now that they're all in Northlands Boys High and we're all in Northlands Girls High, the only excuse these suckers can come up with to get together and flirt is worshipping Jesus on Friday nights. If only they'd be more honest about it. She was appalled by her sudden realisation that people would use any excuse necessary to justify the fulfilment of their own desires.

"What kind of idiot do you think I am?" bellowed Alice at her bewildered friend, Geraldine, who was now wearing a little gold cross around her neck. "You're way more overcome by your hormones than the spirit of Christ."

"I just wanted to share my news with you, Alice. I feel like a whole new person now that I know Jesus is walking with me. If only you could know what it is like to feel the love of our saviour."

"Well," said Alice, "You sound like a bloody parrot. That's what everybody is saying. Can't you think up a more original way of expressing your faith?"

"God bless you, Alice. I hate to say it, but I really think you're in need of saving."

Alice had always hung out with the Jewish girls, who had a better fashion sense. So, instead of prayer groups at lunch breaks, she spent the time with Vanessa & Co. listening to anecdotes about who got into whose pants at Habonim camp and who ignored who at shul. It was Friday nights that were the problem. Instead of going out to disco parties, she had little choice but to stay at home like a frustrated heathen, watching *Magnum PI* on television, while the Christians girls sang evangelical hymns with the boys down the road and the Jewish girls had shabbat dinners with their families. After a while even Tom Selleck in his ridiculous red sports car started to seem attractive to her -- despite the moustache. This, she resented deeply.

So, instead of converting to Christianity, she became a staunch critic, finely attuned to the hypocrisies of the dominant faith. One morning, during school assembly, she started to think about the words of the hymn the entire school was blindly singing:

"Onward Christian soldiers

Marching off to war

With the cross of Jesus

Going on before..."

The next time the bloated headmistress declared, "All stand for hymn number 531," and Alice realised it was *Onward Christian Soldiers*, she remained seated with the Jewish girls. This became her standard practice, until one morning, after assembly, as they were all marching single file back to their classrooms, Belinda Reed made a point of filing in behind Alice.

"I noticed you didn't stand up for the hymn this morning, Alice."

"Did you?"

"Yes, I did, and I wasn't the only one."

"Just leave me alone," said Alice.

"You're disrespecting the Christian faith and we're going to report you," hissed Belinda indignantly.

"Don't be ridiculous. I can't believe what I'm hearing," trying to sound unfazed.

"Well you better believe it."

That afternoon, before being dismissed from school for the day, Alice's class teacher requested that she stay behind for a 'private talk'.

"A number of girls in this class have brought it to my attention that you have been boycotting the singing of hymns during assembly."

"No, not all the hymns. Just one."

"Which one?"

"*Onward Christian Soldiers.*"

"Well, why that one?"

"It's against my value system."

"Alice, how can you say such a thing? You're not Jewish are you?"

"No, I'm not Jewish, but I'm not Christian either. And I don't like the words to that song."

"Why that song and not the others?"

"I don't see what Jesus has to do with war? As far as I've been taught he was supposed to be the greatest pacifist of all time. Turn the other cheek and all that."

"It's just a metaphor, Alice."

"Well, it's not just a metaphor to me. It's a pig-headed song full of dogma and bombast and I'll never sing it as long as I live!" blurted Alice, her face turning red.

"Alice!" exclaimed the teacher, but Alice was already heading for the door, her satchel slung hurriedly over her left shoulder.

"Alice, you're not dismissed. Alice Webster, come back here!"

By the time she reached home, Alice was a mess. Her mother opened the front door on a sweating, sobbing, acne-faced teenager who angrily declared: "I'm converting to Judaism!"

"You can try," replied her mother, not missing a beat. "But the Jews will never accept you."

"Why not?" shouted Alice, impetuously.

"Because it's a matrilineal tribe and you're not part of it. Ask your grandfather. He even learned Yiddish, silly sod. Want some tea? I've just boiled the kettle."

"I'm tired of being the odd one out. Everyone's a Reborn Christian these days -- even Geraldine. Christian fever has hit Northlands like the plague."

"Even Geraldine?"

Her mother seemed shocked and slightly disappointed by the news and, for once, Alice knew that she understood. The two of them were standing on the same turf now. Her mother hadn't been to church since Alice's christening and why she was even christened she didn't know. One thing both her parents agreed on emphatically was a person's right to believe in whatever unspoken mysteries they wanted to in order to get by. Neither Luke nor Charlotte would have objected if their children had expressed a desire to attend church, but neither of them felt any kind of fidelity whatsoever to the gospels.

Luke felt religious when he looked at the stars in the night sky. When he tried to explain his belief system to his daughter, he spoke about atoms, electricity and the organisational wizardry of ants. And Charlotte? Alice was never quite sure what her mother believed. But there was one incident that made it patently clear that she wasn't big on blind belief. Alice was about 10 at the time.

It was a Saturday, and she and Ben went with their father to the shops in the morning to get some supplies for the weekend. Alice loved going shopping with her father because, unlike her mother, he was completely impractical. Even if he had a list, he'd end up getting totally

distracted from it and would return home with peri-peri nuts, taramasalata, halva and Turkish delight – but no washing up liquid.

On this particular Saturday, her father ended up in a conversation at the traffic lights with two men in pale suits with beards. Alice wondered why the two men were wearing suits on such a hot day. When the light turned green, she and Ben crossed the street. But her father remained locked in conversation on the other side of the street as the light turned red, then green, and back to red again. Alice could see that he was trying to move away from the two men subtly, but every time he took a slow step back, they seemed to take a quick step forward. Finally, her father seemed to manage to get rid of them quite amicably. He crossed the street to the other side and the two men waved goodbye, smiling eagerly.

Alice and Ben quickly forgot about the men in suits. They tagged along with their father as he stopped in at the news agency to buy a motoring magazine and chatted to the guy who ran the deli on the corner about the merits of the various different types of olives in the display counter.

That evening Alice's cousins had come to spend the night and they were all sitting around the table having dinner when the front door bell rang.

"I wonder who that could be at this time," said Alice's mother, curiously.

"Oh flip!" said her father. "I forgot to tell you, Charlotte. It's the Mormons."

"The Mormons?" She looked horrified. The doorbell rang again. This time slightly more urgently.

"They accosted me down at the shops this morning and I just couldn't bring myself to say no when they invited themselves round for a 'show and tell' session this evening."

"Luke, how could you? What a sucker. Don't answer the door and they'll eventually go away. Sssshhhh... Quiet kids."

"Come on Charlotte, they've come all this way now. I'll let them in. It'll be educational for the kids."

Alice's father returned to the table accompanied by the two bearded men in suits.

"We're just having dinner," said Charlotte, "I hope you don't mind if we continue eating. Can I offer you something to drink? A glass of wine perhaps?"

"Oh, no thank you. We do not consume alchohol. Water will be fine," said one of the two bearded men, in a strong American accent.

"Seeing as we're joining you at the dinner table, do you mind if we say grace?" asked the other.

"Sure," said Alice's father, quickly. "No problem." Alice's mother gave him a dirty look.

"Well, we *have* started eating already," she said.

"Oh, that's no problem for us," said the taller Mormon, taking his seat at the table. "Let us pray..."

Alice was not used to saying grace. She bent her head, but kept opening her eyes slightly to see what the others were doing. She saw her mother take a big gulp of red wine and roll her eyes as she bowed her head. After saying grace, the Mormons took two sets of calendar-style flip cards from their bags and began to lecture the family about the origins and practices of their religion. After a while, Alice could tell that Ben was getting restless. He was fidgeting a lot and asked to go the toilet twice. But nothing could deter the Mormons. They drawled on and on in a monotonously authoritative way until Alice's leftover gravy had started to coagulate on her plate. Her father kept looking at his watch in a polite attempt to convey to the Mormons that Saturday night was ticking on by. By the time they had finally finished their sermon, Alice's mother had almost finished the bottle of wine.

"Amen," they said in unison. "Praise the lord, our father, creator of all things."

"Excellent," said Alice's father in a jolly voice, in an attempt to bring back a mood of lightness to the table. "Now kids, it's question time. You can ask the Mormons about anything that's puzzling you. Anything at all."

"Well," said Alice's cousin, Matty, "What I don't understand is why all your prophets are American. Why aren't there any prophets from other places in the world?"

"Good question," said Alice's father, eager to hear the Mormons' response.

"Well, dear child, for that answer, you will have to ask the dear lord, our father."

"Why don't you have a picture of Mohammed in your flip book?" asked Alice, who had recently been on a tour of Durban's Indian market with her father.

"Well, Mohammed is not considered a holy man in our book," said the shorter Mormon.

"Why not?" asked Alice.

"Well, child, for that, you will have to ask the dear lord, our father." Alice's mother was becoming visibly irritated.

"Well, if you'll excuse me for a moment, gentlemen, I'll just get another bottle of wine from the fridge," she said, pushing her chair out from the table.

"We'd rather if you didn't," said the taller Mormon firmly.

"Is that so?" said Alice's mother. "And why is that?"

"Frankly, you offend us and our beliefs by drinking alcohol. Alcohol is not pure. It is not the creation of God."

"Well, now that we're being frank," she bellowed back at him, "let me tell you, you and your puerile drivel offends me, my god and my children's intelligence. And I would appreciate it if you would leave my home immediately. You are not welcome here."

"Now, now, Madam," began the taller Mormon, in an effort to placate.

"Now, now, nothing. Get out of my house now and take your book of phoney American prophets with you!"

In pale desperation, the Mormons looked to the man of the house for support, but, when Alice's father remained silent, they quickly packed their bags.

"May god bless your children," said the Mormons as they were hastily ushered out of the front door of 194 Northway, Durban North never to return again.

It was Alice's mother who suggested she change schools.

"To be honest, I don't see it getting any better for you fast," she said quite matter of factly. "Why not leave Northlands?" Alice was shocked at the boldness of her mother's suggestion. She thought she was going to tell her to buckle down and get on with it.

"You really think so?"

"*Et pour quoi pas*?" she responded, throwing her hands in the air. "I don't see why not."

"Well you were hardly in favour of the idea when I was being terrorised by that battle-axe of a teacher in Standard Four," said Alice.

"Yes, but that was a personality thing. There's always a nasty a teacher somewhere along the line. It would have been cowardly for you to run off with your tail between your legs. No matter how tough it was, it was right that you stood your ground. This is different. This is beyond the personal."

"I suppose I know what school you've got in mind for me."

"Right. So, what do you think?"

"I'll go." Alice had always resisted going to Durban Girls College. It was the school her parents had wanted her to go to when she completed senior primary. But she had resisted violently. Apart from wanting to stay part of the stream she'd joined in standard two, she was determined not to go to an elitist private school. Word among her friends at Northlands was that Durban Girls College was a toffee-nosed snob school for girls from ODFs.

"What's an ODF?" asked Alice expecting it to be something vulgar.

"An Old Durban Family!" ODFs seemed to be resented by anyone who didn't come from one. Alice had felt the deep-seated animosity between private and public schools at a swimming gala once. She had laughed along with the girls from her school at the College girls who wore panama hats to protect their delicate complexions from the harsh sun. The Northlands girls were hatless and chewed gum. They cheered their teams on, screaming "Ice cream, chocolate, banana split, we think the other teams are up to ... Shift to the left and shift to the right, stand up sit down, fight, fight, fight!" The girls from College politely clapped at the end of a race their team had won. Cheering and jeering were not considered ladylike.

But now Alice couldn't give a damn if Durban Girls' College was a snob school or not. To her it represented the possibility of a new start, free of prayer groups and pressure to convert. When her father got home from work and heard the news, he was delighted.

"What have I been trying to tell you all along? The government schools are controlled by Christian National Education. These Nats want everybody to think the same. It's their policy to discourage freedom of thought. They're like the bloody Nazis. At a private school, you'll stand more chance of getting a decent education."

Alice wasn't exactly sure what the government and the Nazis had in common. Her father was prone to obscure theories. But there was a kernel of sense to what he was saying. She'd been kicked out of religious education class on Thursday because she'd dared to ask why her Jewish friends wouldn't be allowed into heaven. Her parents had taught her that it was good to question things, but now she was being rapped over the knuckles for it.

"It's not about logic or fairness. It's about belief," said the teacher. "If you refuse to accept that the only way to heaven is through Jesus Christ Our Lord, then you're not welcome in my classroom. It's a simple matter of faith and you seem to be severely lacking in it!"

Alice left the classroom and spent the rest of the period wandering up and down the school corridors, which were deserted, apart from a middle-aged black man on his hands and knees polishing the floors red. Alice smiled at him awkwardly as she wandered back and forth,

trying not to seem conspicuous. She hoped to find some kind of common humanity with the man -- to somehow acknowledge the ridiculousness of the moment. He smiled back, guardedly, and kept on polishing.

THE END OF EDEN

The end of Eden began in a dream. It was dark and hot. Alice was 14 years old and it was December. She could always remember the geometry of that house, but never the details. She could not remember the view, or if there was a window in the room.

Trees abounded in the suburb where she lived: giant and generous avocado trees; jacarandas with juicy purple petals that squelched under car tyres in the spring. Their house was on the top of a hill, just north of the city which she could see hugging the shoreline in a great sweepy curve from her bedroom window.

But there were no trees here. This was not her bedroom. This was not her bed. She does not remember the view from the window. She remembers only that her body was lying in tune with the river in that bed on the south side of the house, closest to the Umgeni. The only remarkable thing about that house was that it was close to the bird park. Her aunt and uncle had rented it as an interim measure in a time of financial need which they were praying would be temporary. It's amazing how long temporary can be. Her aunt's hair turned grey in that house.

She sees the room from above, like a bird – like one of the big grey hadedas that flocked about the banks of the muddy, red Umgeni river. Big, hulking African birds they were. Sometimes when she was alone in the house, she would have conversations with those strange-shaped birds with their big bodies and their long thin beaks. Not many things could make her laugh when she was fourteen. But the hadedas could – just by being there. So big and weird and out of place – like they'd been left behind by the dodos and the dinosaurs.

"Ha-de-dah," they'd call out in plaintive ribbons of sound.

"Ha-de-dahhhhh," she'd yell back to them, extended ribs straining against the tight bodice of her new school uniform.

"Ha-de-dahhhh," they'd reply, loud and wild. "We're still here. We're still here."

In the room was the bed in which she had the dream. It was a single bed with brass knobs and a white cover intricately embroidered with petite flower patterns. Her head lay to the east, nearest to the sea - the big, warm, wavy Indian Ocean. She remembers the alignment. Her body lay on the same longitude as the river, which flows from high up in the Drakensberg mountains - the holy heights of the ancient green mountains of Zululand to the sea and beyond.

How warm and slightly wet she felt beneath the hot covers. Hot breath and damp nape of neck in the quiet, humid darkness. And that aching feeling between her bounteous fourteen-year-old thighs - an adolescent ache for all the beyond that lay on the other side of the sea, far, far away. Under the inconstant rhythms of the traffic, she imagined the flow of the river and beneath it, the constant low hum of earth. She remembers what it was like to lie in that bed and dream. Umgeni. Hadeda. *"Lala kahle, umfaan. Tula baba, tulantwana. Tula baba, tulantwana."* Even while dreaming that dream, she knew it was coming true.

She dreamed that her mother was dead. She had died of cancer and was speaking to her from the grave. She looked like herself, but also like a child. In the dream Alice was hysterical with loss. Screaming and crying and railing against the injustice of destiny. But her screams did not seem to reach her mother or affect her. She was present, but gone. She just stood there smiling in a strangely neutral way, as if she was above and beyond the tragedy of her own death.

When Alice awoke she tried to forget the dream. It was summer and she was staying with her aunt and uncle while her parents were away in London on holiday. All the girls in her new class at College were in a frenzy about who to take to the end-of-term party. One afternoon, Alice was sitting in the lounge talking to her aunt about what she was going to wear, when the phone rang. Her aunt answered.

"Luke!" said her aunt, excitedly. "How's London?" But then after a while, her tone seemed to change slightly as if something were not quite right.

"Right," said her aunt. "I see..." And then she suddenly she seemed jolly again.

"Right. Okay, fine. No problem. Right, I'll pass you on to Alice then. Alice, it's your father on the phone. He's got some big news for you." Alice took the receiver.

"Hello Daddy. How's it going over there?"

"Hello, my darling. How are you doing? How did your exams go?"

"I'm not sure. We haven't got our marks back yet. But don't worry about that. How is London?"

"I can't even describe how beautiful it is. The apartment is even more fabulous than we could have dreamed of. It's right in the heart of Knightsbridge. And yesterday, it snowed! You wouldn't believe how brilliant everything looks in the snow."

"How's mummy?"

"Mummy's fine," said her father, after a brief hesitation.

"Can I speak to her?"

"Well, not right now. She's just taken a walk to the shops. But listen, I've got a surprise for you and Ben."

"A surprise? Really?"

"Yes. Mummy and I have decided that we want you to join us here in London for Christmas."

"But I thought you'd both be home for Christmas."

"Yes, but it's just so beautiful here, we thought we should all have our first white Christmas together as a family."

"Wow!"

"So as soon as school is over, you and Ben are going to be flying over to London to join Mummy and I."

"Wow, I don't know what to say. London!"

"There's nothing to say. Just get packing. Make sure you and Ben bring lots of jerseys. It's freezing."

Alice should have felt excited, but when she put the phone down she was filled with dread. Something was wrong. She could feel it. Something was wrong with her mother. But then she told herself it was just her mind playing silly games with her again. Of course her mother was fine. Why would there be anything wrong with her? She and her father were having such a wonderful time in London that they wanted their children to be there with them. Christmas in London. Nothing strange about that. Her mother was fine. Of course she was fine. She berated herself for having such a morbid imagination and tried to focus on other things like the end of term party and what clothes she was going to pack for London.

And before long the party had happened. Their suitcases were packed and she and Ben were being dropped off at Louis Botha Airport. They waved goodbye to their aunt and uncle and were ushered through the gate at international departures by an air hostess with pink lipstick on.

But on the trip to London, Alice's mind started to play funny games with her again. What would happen if her father were alone when they arrived? If he'd come on his own to collect them from the airport? That would be a very bad sign.

To cancel out the sign, Alice made a silent deal with herself. If her father was alone, there had to be another reason for it. The reason was that he had come to collect them in a Rolls Royce because he wanted to surprise them. So if her father was waiting for them alone at international arrivals, she wouldn't panic. She'd wait until they reached the garage where the car was parked. And if there was no Roll's Royce there, then she'd know for sure. She didn't know where the idea of the Rolls Royce came from. Only that if it wasn't there, they were in serious trouble. She couldn't have stacked the odds against "happily ever after" any higher.

When they arrived her father was waiting alone. When they got to the garage, there was no Rolls Royce.

"What's the matter?" said Alice to her father. Her father looked at her with the sadness of the world in his eyes.

"Mummy's got cancer, hasn't she?"

"How did you know?"

"I don't know. I just knew."

BORSCHT AND TEARS

Alice's brother had always been a bit bewildered by the world, as if being born was too much of a shock. He had difficulty tying his shoelaces and seemed always to be spilling his Fanta on the restaurant tablecloths. On family outings her brother would invariably get lost, or drop his soft serve ice cream on the sea horse mosaic in the pavement. Her mother would spit on a paper napkin and wipe the chocolate off of his cheeks. And then there would be tears and it would be time for them to all go home. Even as he grew older, Ben could never brush his curly blonde hair into shape. He would wake up in the morning singing songs that nobody else knew the words to.

But now he was the contained one. Strong in his mysterious silence, as Alice and her father stared out of the apartment window onto the skeletons of trees in snow-covered Knightsbridge, leaking arias.

Down the road from the apartment in Knightsbridge was a Russian restaurant where they went for dinner one night. Between pained silences, they reassured each other that they were lucky. She was in the best possible hands. What good fortune that they were in London at the time, where they could get the best possible medical attention.

As the three of them sat there eating their borscht with long teeth and thinking of nothing but her, a string quartet began to play some sad old Russian tunes. All three of them burst out laughing at the same time. They laughed and laughed until they had forgotten why they started.

Every day they would drive to the hospital where Charlotte was recovering from a lumpectomy. It was one of the first operations of its kind in the world – conservative surgery, they called it. It didn't work.

Charlotte's struggle lasted for three years. The remission and then the mastectomy. The septic wounds. The chemo. The vicious scars. The inescapable asymmetry. The hair loss. The depression. The hope. The scans. The lump. The op. The courage. The waiting. The check-ups. The treatment. The waiting. The tests. The courage. The vomiting. The bloating. The weakness.

The unending hope. Their desperate belief in the face of her great suffering. And then one day the whole opera came to an abrupt end. It was over and she was gone.

THE GOLF COURSE

Shortly after her 18th birthday Alice decided that she would never have enough time in her life for golf. People die in such dramatic ways in the movies. In the thick of war, or the midst of a storm. Her mother died on a Thursday morning. Even the waves were still.

After they left the hospital, her father took the regular route back home. On the way they passed the same golf course they'd passed every other day of their lives -- green, quiet and flat. As they drove past, Alice noticed a black man bumbling in the bushes for a white man's ball. The course was neatly mowed, as it was the day before and the week before. They drove past the golf course and over the bridge that crosses the Umgeni River, past the statue of the Virgin Mary outside Our Lady of Fatima Convent School, around the traffic circle and up the hill to their home; 194 Northway, Durban North, which would never be the same again.

AN INCIDENT IN ROME

Lately, she had begun to develop a fascination for the relics of things that were once golden. So Rome felt like the perfect place to be. Freer and more alive than she'd ever been and breathing in the lingering magic of the ultimate fall. She wanted to make these seconds count and was forcing herself into a kind of frenzy to honour this brief snatch of time in Rome for what it was: her 18-year-old moment at what was once the epicentre of the turning world.

Come on, get yourself to imagine it more truly, she told herself, pressing her nails into the soft pale skin on the inside of her arms. Breathe in the fact and make yourself know it in your cells. This is where the ancient empire fell. Where it all came crumbling down. Her mother had always wanted her to experience this and, now that Alice had finally got here, she could feel her mother's presence in everything she did or said, as if she was still alive -- or alive in her.

It was only about 40 minutes now until the Pope was due to speak, and Vatican Square was packed with expectant people, fussing and moving about, trying to find the perfect spot from which to observe the leader of the Catholic church. Alice and Derryn had decided to head for the cool marble immensity of Saint Peter's in an effort to escape the sweating throngs of devotees massed beneath the balcony where his holiness was due to appear. Nobody seemed to be listening to the small orchestra that was playing on a raised podium in the middle of the square. They were all straining their necks in an effort to be the first to notice the red velvet curtains parting and the small white-clad pontiff emerging from the interior.

Derryn was a few steps ahead, caught in the cluttered fringes of a Japanese tour party. Alice observed her friend's height and grace. The way she avoided being prodded in the hips by a Nikon camera. How she towered above the Japanese, but managed to slip between them with ease -- not rudely bumping anyone or pushing anyone aside. She seemed to glide almost mistily

through the solid mass of peopled flesh. This was something Alice had always loved about her friend. Her ability to measure invisible things like space and sound.

Alice, who was shorter and darker -- both in hair colour and temperament -- couldn't help envying her friend's natural elegance -- her lack of excess and her inherent sense of proportion. Her reactions were rarely extreme, her moods never outlandish. Sometimes Alice secretly hoped that, by spending as much time as she did with Derryn, some of her friend's calmness would flow gently into her.

Derryn Reed was an antidote to the flatness of the world. She was a pianist, and she loved perfumes and rare scents. On rare afternoons, having both escaped the rigours of sports practice, the two girls would catch the bus outside Durban Girls College and travel through the Berea, beneath the flame trees and jacarandas, to Musgrave Centre. Escaping the summer humidity, they'd wander about the air-conditioned shop interiors in their school uniforms, lingering over books in Adams & Griggs and testing the fragrances at the Stuttafords beauty counters, to the irritation of the aging Estee Lauder saleswoman.

Together, Alice and Derryn were intent on exploring realms beyond the everyday: sensuous experiences that could transport them into new kinds of feeling and knowing. This wasn't an abstract thing for them. It was something they talked about constantly and actively pursued -- now more than ever, because now was their time. They were on a pre-paid, six-week-long Contiki tour of Europe. Before they'd even lifted off from the runway at Louis Botha airport, they had made a pact to talk to strangers, to walk down the back streets, eat in local dives, ignore the itinerary and spend as much time as possible seeking out art. They trusted art. They believed in it. Art had proved itself to them as the one sure way of making contact with the extraordinary.

When they finally got to see the David in Florence, they spent hours staring at him, discussing his immaculate form. As Derryn sat sketching his noble face and perfect Florentine

nose, Alice circled him slowly, longing to stretch beyond the ropes and touch his marble legs, to run her fingers along the protruding veins in his large masculine hands.

Today, the two girls were less interested in the main event than in the ancient basilica, which they'd learnt about in their art classes with Mrs D'Unienville back at Durban Girls College. She was the one teacher who could hold their attention for an entire double period. The whole class would be disappointed when the bell rang and the sound of hundreds of shoes could be heard shuffling and stomping along the polished linoleum passageways of the school.

A diminutive and feisty French Mauritian, Mrs D'Unienville was lean and tanned with neatly-cut grey hair. She dressed differently from the other teachers, wearing short denim skirts and leather sandals. There were no unnecessary details in the cuts and lines of her clothes. Everything fitted closely. When she gave her classes she would sit on a table and the girls, who usually sat in neat rows, would gather around her informally, listening to her stories about Picasso's predatory infatuation with African masks or Gaughin's estrangement from his wealthy family, as if around a campfire. As she got into the heart of the lecture, articulating each word with the impassioned vehemence of a French speaker, her skin would glow.in the late afternoon light pouring in through the large sash windows of the Victorian classroom.

For three years those art classes had been the girls' escape. A way of forgetting about family dramas unfolding nightly in the apparently quiet and stable upper middle-class suburb of Durban North. Alice's raged, while Derryn's quietly simmered, but both girls had their domestic sagas. Halfway through standard nine, Alice announced to her ailing mother (who was standing in the upstairs passageway with a coat hanger yelling: "You're mad. You're mad and you're driving me bloody mad!") that she would like to move out of home and into College House, the boarding house attached to the school. Derryn had already been a boarder since the beginning of the year when her parents turned Christian.

The two girls shared a cubicle in the upstairs dorm and at night they'd tip-toe across the cold tiled floors and climb the creaky old wooden steps, trying not to wake the juniors who had to be in bed by eight. Up in the attic of the old boarding house was their study. Frequently Alice and Derryn would stay up till midnight, sometimes even two in the morning studying art from notes handwritten and reproduced on an old purple-inked Roneo machine by Mrs D'Unienville. In the roof of the study was a tiny window through which they could see the moon and, in its light, they studied the lives and art of Gaughin, Picasso, Brancusi, Giacometti, Moore, Frank Lloyd-Wright, Le Corbusier ... Derryn was particularly taken by Brancusi's sculpture for the blind and tried for hours to imagine what it would be like to feel those forms if she could not see.

For Alice it was Giacometti -- in particular a work called *City Square* in which several etiolated bronze bodies moved in rigid circuits across the surface of a square, never quite meeting or touching. Although there were no such squares in Durban, this was how she experienced the city. It was a place where she felt alone and untouchable in an adult kind of a way. Strolling along Smith and West Streets, lingering in the old Victorian arcades, her sadness had an elegance it lacked in the suburbs. There she was a just a side act -- a messed up teenager being forced to witness the slow, but violent decline of her parents' marriage. Giacometti seemed to understand the silence this kind of pageant can induce.

It was strange for both girls to imagine that those late afternoon art classes and midnight studying sessions were over. School was over and real life was starting to rush in.

The bustle in Vatican Square was growing increasingly frenetic as the girls ran up the wide front steps of the great cathedral. To experience the wonder of Saint Peter's for real seemed beyond their wildest imaginings. But that was what this trip was intended to be. That was the point of the gift. How to honour the gesture? How to communicate their thanks? The only way, they'd decided one morning back in Durban at the Three Monkeys café, was to live it as fully as

they possibly could and hope that Alice's mother was somehow watching. Everything would be a dedication to her.

"It's built on Saint Peter's grave I think," said Derryn, as they stepped into the main entrance hall through one of the five great doors.

"Yes, by Constantine," said Alice, suddenly whispering. She could smell the incense in the air and took in a deep breath of frankincense. From the moment they entered the vast stronghold of golden magnificence, they were enraptured by every detail of the architecture. On the right they could see the Holy Door and alongside it a golden plaque stating that it is only opened every 25 years, in Jubilee or Holy years.

"I want to see the altar. It lies exactly on Saint Peter's tomb where his relics lie."

"And the Pieta," said Alice.

They could hardly see it at first. It was surrounded by masses of people trying to get a look at the marble virgin and her dead son. They made their way around a group of aging Germans with hired earphones on and past an Italian family. Alice noticed the eyes of the two elder Italian boys move from the Pieta onto Derryn's backside, ignoring their grandmother's loud commentary.

"I just want to see the band across the Virgin's breast," said Alice. "Then I'll give up. That's where Michelangelo carved his name."

"I can see her head, Alice! I can see her veil. Come in here in front of me."

Alice squeezed into the space her friend had carved for her and there it was. The Pieta. More beautiful and perfect than she could ever have dreamed. The marble was carved with such love it seemed, in parts, to be as soft and liquid as milk. It seemed to be melting into the atmosphere, almost dissolving. She could feel the muscles in her own body loosening at the sight. Her lungs seemed to expand with the sheer exhilaration of seeing.

"You know I am not a Christian," Alice whispered to her friend. "But is this not holy?"

"It is," answered Derryn gently. "There's something about it. Something sad and beautiful."

Back in the central nave, the girls wandered about in silence, taking in the splendour of the huge space and staring upwards into the heights of the vault at the vast wings of the Dove of the Holy Spirit. Under one of the pillars of the dome they came upon a statue of Saint Peter, his feet stained and smothered by believer's kisses.

"Sometimes, I wish I could be Catholic," said Alice. "Just to be so convinced."

"Of what?" asked Derryn.

"Of something beyond. An afterlife."

"Come," said Derryn. She took Alice by the hand and led her to the very centre of Bernini's bronze dome. Taking Alice's other hand in hers, she said, "Lean back and spin."

At first Alice did not have the faith to lean back completely, but as they began to turn, she stretched out her arms and felt Derryn's weight balancing her as she leant back fully and stretched her neck back to look up. For a second or two she could see the separate windows of the dome and the light pouring through them, but as they began to move faster, the single squares joined together into a continuous band of golden light. Alice began to laugh, wildly, as they spun round and round. Her laughter was coming from a place deep inside, somewhere forgotten about. She could hear her friend's laughter too. Faster and faster they spun. Laughing, seeing and feeling the light, the ancient scent and the perfection of it all turning in the golden present.

At last they stopped and broke apart, stumbling about trying to catch their balance. Everything was a blur, but Alice could feel the gazes of disgruntled tourists upon her. This made her laugh louder, more freely. She was profoundly happy. The world seemed suddenly perfect and utterly sublime. Can such sublimity be sustained, she caught herself thinking. Can it last? Can my mother see me now?

Disoriented but jubilant, the two girls wandered towards the light pouring in through the front doors of the cathedral.

"Let's go see the Pope," said Alice.

As they wandered out, sighing in wonder, and feeling the sudden burst of Italian sunlight on their cool skins, Alice noticed an old man bent over a stick at the top of the steps, hesitating to take his first step downwards. Overcome as she was by the beauty of the world, she walked over to the old man and offered, by way of gesture, to help him down the stairs. He immediately took her left arm enfolding it in his. A musty smell of tobacco arose from the contact and she noticed that he was unshaven, generally unkempt. She felt sad for the old man. Felt his loneliness seep over her. His grip was strong and together they began to descend.

"*Bellisima*!" he cried. "*Bellisima*!" For a moment she caught herself bathing in the compliment, feeling momentarily beautiful, like a young girl in a film by Bertolucci. Yes, she thought, this is beautiful. "*Si, si*," she responded keeping her focus on the steps. They were nearing the bottom where the crowd was thick. An announcement was being made in Italian and the voice reverberated loudly across the square. At last, the Pope is being introduced, she thought.

Suddenly she felt her chin being wrenched upwards. Her face was being held in the rough hands of the old man, still exclaiming "*Bella*! *Bella*! *Bellisima*!" His face was up close to hers. She could see his yellowing teeth and the dark holes between them. Suddenly he was kissing her. Like a grandfather, she thought, but then his thick tongue was forcing itself into her mouth. And his breath was overwhelming her and he was holding her tight, forcing her to be close. Forcing her to take his kiss. She pulled away violently and ran down the last two stairs into the crowd. Panting, terrified. Foreign words circulated around her like black flies. She could feel her heart thumping in her chest and her breath restricted as her ribs shut tight around her shocked lungs. "Si! Papa!" rang out the voice from the giant amplifier. "*Si*! *Si*! *Papa*! *Il sagrato de Deus*..."

Where was Derryn? What were all these people doing? All staring in one direction, seeking one answer. Pushing themselves forward, into each other, flesh to flesh, bone to bone. A fat man shunted her aside as he forced his way further into the depths of the hot crowd, now yelling, chanting in unison, words she did not understand. She was struggling to breathe. Looking upwards in an attempt to recover some fragment of before. But there was no sky -- only the sight of the blood red curtain moving aside and his tiny potent holiness standing there soaking up the adulation of the masses. Here was god's apparent emissary, flanked by two uniformed guards: a small white and purple fleck on the distant marble balcony. The crowd erupted into thunderous applause and adulation. But his voice came thundering through the deep noise, piercing it like metal. Like gunfire.

Oh god, where is Derryn? I am poisoned, she thought. I am turning the world inside out with my emptiness. My eyes are staining everything, turning treasures to darkness. I am returned again to this shooting absence. This blue-black bruise of nothingness. Nothing but longing -- and sudden, harsh remembering. Oh god, remove me. Take me out of this. Take me out of this world.

"Alice! Alice! What happened? Alice, what's wrong?"

"I've got to get out of here. I've got to get out of this place," said Alice, moving people aside with her outstretched arms.

"What's happening?" asked Derryn, catching up.

"I've just got to get out of here. I'll meet you at that gelateria where we bought coffees this morning. I'll wait for you there."

"I'm coming with."

"No," exclaimed Alice, shocked at her own vehemence. Derryn looked suddenly assaulted, taken aback.

"Let me come with you," she pleaded.

"Thank you. But I need to be alone. I'll see you at the gelateria. I promise." Turning and heading outwards towards the light and open space at the periphery of the square, she catches a glimpse of Derryn's bewildered face in the crowd.

"Forgive me," she says, not loudly enough for anyone to hear.

Despite her attempts to set things right, she knows she's violated something: A trust, a dependence that is secretly relied upon. But she can't seem to help it. She doesn't want to be calmed down. She doesn't want to be subdued into believing that everything is fine. Submitting to Derryn's reassurances would rob her of this rushing brutality of feeling. And that's the only real link she still has to her mother. Feeling is the only way to be faithful to her now. There is nothing else left. Nothing but relics and mementos.

In her struggle to reach the edge of the square, she longs to bruise herself -- to fall and bleed to demonstrate her love. But she does not. In keeping with the godless algebra of loss, all sensation is contained within her, along with the memory of her mother throwing her head back and laughing. Her mouth is wide open and red-lipped. Her blonde wig catches the light reflected off her wineglass. She is laughing loudly and adamantly -- doubting nothing. "My daughter will see Europe," she declares. "If it's the last gift I give her."

FLIGHT

Where have you been?

I've been to London to visit the queen.

London was never as she expected it to be. In her mind, it was a solution – a place where everything would turn out fine. She arrived on a predictably grey and miserable day, and caught the tube from Heathrow to East Finchley where her friend Adele was staying. After a month of dope, Channel 4 and late mornings, she found the courage to end it. She called Hugh. They spoke for 10 minutes.

That was all it took to end the relationship for good. There were her words in London, his words in Johannesburg and an expanse of emptiness between them. Alice resisted the urge to prolong the conversation so that everything would be fine at the end of it. The silences stayed awkward. No attempts at rescue. She put the phone down and sobbed loudly in the empty house. Tried to turn up the radiator, but realised it was preset.

Things hadn't been right between them for months. Hugh had unguardedly fallen into the role of the lover, Alice the beloved: simple parts that suited neither of them. In her presence, he found himself uncharacteristically convinced by the strength of his own emotions. She accepted his gifts with a secret reluctance, inexplicable even to her. But neither of them could bring themselves to finish off the love.

One Sunday in the suffocating heat of late December they found themselves on the roof of a suburban shopping mall, drifting hazily through the myriad stalls of tie-dyed T-shirts, Indonesian earrings and imported cheeses. Things seemed fine until she saw the camels. At first it seemed like some frivolous and transient hallucination from an afternoon dream: two camels on the roof of a shopping mall. But as they got closer to the two creatures with their huge sad eyes and their frantically dilating nostrils, she began to get a dreadful feeling somewhere between her ribs. There was a man taking money from people so their children could ride around

the roof of the parking garage on the animals' backs. A little boy was whining and poking his ice cream stick into the camel's rump. The melted pink ice cream had solidified around the boy's mouth as he moaned about getting another ride. The creature remained silent and passive.

Alice felt sick and could no longer hear the words Hugh was speaking. She just stood there, still and dazed, magnetised by the camel's liquid eyes and the unknowable intelligence beyond them. A huge metal rod had been rammed through the soft flesh of the camel's nostrils, running from the left side of its head to the right, just beneath the bony ridge of its nose. Mucous had congealed around its flesh where the rod emerged and its breathing was heavy in the heat. The camel remained awkwardly submissive as the boy began to clamber up the saddle onto its back. Alice could hear Hugh's voice, thin and distant against the beating of her own heart, which had become almost audible.

"Come on. Let's go. Don't let it affect you, Alice. You can't take on the pain of every camel in the world."

He should perhaps have remained silent then, for she was as good as deaf to his gentle coaxings. People were cruel and she could no longer bear to be in her own skin. To be human was to be somehow weak and brutal at the same time. It was no longer just the camel's suffering that was bearing down on her. The rod might as well have been running through her nose or Hugh's. Both of them were equally trapped in a ridiculous circuit of their own making. Who was the camel and who was the keeper? She couldn't tell. But the suffocating sensation had become inescapable.

"Come on Alice," she could hear Hugh saying, "You're torturing yourself for nothing. Camels are tough creatures. They can take it."

The camels may have lived happily ever after, but the next day Alice announced to Hugh that she was leaving for London.

"London?" he asked, turning pale in the sunlight.

"Yes," she said. "The false Eden of every twentysomething white Wasp this side of the Equator. What a sad little lemming I am."

"How long will you be going for?"

"I don't know," she replied. "I don't have the answer yet."

"Why London?"

"I speak the language. I can get a waitressing job."

"Do you think that's a good enough reason?"

"Probably not. It wasn't the last time. And with half of white South Africa there now, it's not likely to be any better this time round."

"So what's the point? Why be a waitress when you can be a journalist? You're doing well here."

"That might be the reason. I'm getting all tied in. I feel like things are closing in on me. The next thing I'll be driving around in a 4X4 with two spoilt kids shooing away beggars at the stop street outside the mall."

"That bad, hey?"

"I'm sorry, Hugh," she said, trying to reach his eyes. "I feel I'm constantly being eased into assuming a role here and I'm only 25."

"And you're free to do what you want to do." Hugh was older than Alice and had been a loner for many years. So, in spite of himself, he understood her need to go.

"You're right. I'm free and I'm selfish."

"That's not what I meant."

"No, but you're right anyway."

After half an hour of wordless confusion over a Bloody Mary in the Jan Smuts departure lounge, she had placed her hand luggage on the security conveyer belt and stepped through the metal detector. Pushing the small of her back into the base of the upright seat to avoid the sudden

nausea of take off, she tried to think of the sparkling new chapter that awaited her in London. But her eyes suddenly filled with hot tears as she watched Johannesburg grow grey and faint beneath the smooth metal wing of the plane.

In February she found herself a room in Highgate and a waitressing job at a tapas bar in Camden Town. On her days off she liked to walk, getting lost in the ancient grid of London's streets, spending long hours in book shops and eating in Chinese restaurants with duck carcasses hanging in the windows. Walking through the streets of Soho, breathing in the icy winter air so deeply her nostrils burnt, Alice felt relieved to be on her own amongst strangers from everywhere. Being alone was something she could do better than most.

In as much as she had left her relationship, she had left her country and her job. She could no longer bear to duck behind that sneaky persona of objectivity that sets journalists apart from human beings who are confused and can't say what happened (where, how and why) in less than 500 words.

And yet, there had been that report on Channel 4 a few weeks back that said something about Mandela deciding to give the bad generals' their due. About how this was going to affect the vote. She'd had felt a pang and lifted her fist in support of Mandela before turning her toast under the grill. But now it seemed even further away. So far from that day in April when they all stood in the ballot queue feeling breathless and historic.

Jodi and Nicole had travelled all the way from Cape Town in Nicole's battered red Golf so they could all vote together. They sat up drinking whiskey till 4am, wandering whether, after all this – the guilt, the family rows, the marches, the anger, the fear -- they were even going to vote. They'd never thought about how that moment would actually feel: the implications and consequences of that day. By making that particular cross, they'd be aligning themselves with everybody, with the common yes. And this had suddenly felt strange. They were outsiders

who'd swum vigorously against the stream and now, by voting ANC, they'd be going with the flow. Denouncing their difference and their darkness.

Now it was all bright flags and constitutions, reconciliation and cheesy news readers. Was this their deal? What rights would they have to swim naked in public pools at midnight, to listen to music in hospital, to learn contradictory histories at school, to abort unwanted foetuses, to get jobs because they deserved them?

Alice had considered voting Pan African Congress, in the desire for a kind of dissent that was second nature to her.

"You can't vote PAC, you crazy girl," said Jodi laughing and pulling out another strand of hair from the crown of her head. "You're white."

"Exactly."

"Exactly what? There's no exactly about it. The PAC is a BC party."

"Well there's something about the absurdity of me voting for a black consciousness government that appeals to me. There's a rightness about it that goes beyond the American apple pie democracy being imposed on this place. And at least my odd-one-outness will be made somehow patent then."

"But to nobody but you. Voting means something outside of yourself. Voting PAC is too ironic a gesture for you my friend. You're far too sincere a somebody for that kind of a gesture."

"I'm not so sure about the irony though. Really, in the bigger sweep of history I'm just a tick on a cow's arse – being white in Africa. I really do feel that insignificant. So why not vote in a way that marks the absurdity of my being here? The ANC doesn't need my vote."

"Because you were born here – finished and *klaar*. Because you belong here. Because you're a South African and you'll never be able to get away from that fact."

"If only I could see it like that. Maybe one day, please God."

She'd wanted to make a mark that would enshrine her lack of place. But ended up backing down another whiskey, bamboozling herself with warm and fuzzy rainbow nation optimism and voting ANC.

Now, despite the small tips and the lonely late night returns on the underground, she was relieved to be away from it all. This year is already turning out better than last, she thought in the few scattered moments before sleep. But then last year was dreadful. In trying to make sense of how bad it was, she came up with an equation. She worked out that her life seemed to happen in four-year cycles. Every fourth year seemed to be a watershed of sorts.

"Like the South African school boycotts," quipped Adele. "They also seemed to happen in four year cycles ... 1976 ... 1980 ... 1984." Adele was doing her Masters at the School of Oriental and African Studies at London University.

No, thought Alice, not like that at all. But she laughed anyway to meet the implicit expectation. Then, in a half-hearted compromise between what she felt and what she felt she could say, she added: "No, I think that would be lionising my life cycle just a bit."

Despite the laughter, it was no joke to her. She couldn't bear the thought of having her story stuck onto a history she didn't own. Her defensiveness about her place in the picture seemed even sharper, now that she was out of it. Far away in London town, where the girl behind the counter asked if she was a New Zealander and where it was impossible to buy a single *skyf* at the café on the corner.

Her heart's history couldn't seem to find its place in the black and white *Drum* postcard South Africa was too often reduced to. She could speak of herself and she could speak of South Africa, but never in the same breath. Newspaper articles were one thing, but when it came to truth, the personal and the political seemed to separate out like oil and water. She wondered if she'd ever feel brave enough to write a word about her home.

Mostly she forced herself to forget. She was 25 years old. She wanted to feel young and silly. She was a waitress, so she remembered orders and blotted out the rest. She learnt how to say "meatballs" in Spanish - "garlic", "thank you" and "it's a pleasure"... Late one night as she was putting the chairs up on the tables and cashing up for the night, some guys who worked at a neighbouring pub dropped by for a nightcap with the Spanish waitresses. She noticed that the Irishman had a particular sparkle about him.

"Gee, Aiden, you look chirpy," she said, feeling instantly appalled by the flatness of her accent. She felt awkward and shy in the orb of his radiating coolness.

"Well, I should do darlin'. I've just chomped half a microdot."

"On a Tuesday night? You must be crazy."

"You can bet you're life on it. You want to treat yourself to a little Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds?"

"Never!"

"Oh you should know better."

"I should know better about what?"

"Don't they teach ya anything down there in Africa? Didn't yer gran'mammy teach you never to say never?"

In the beginning of the acid trip they found themselves stumbling together through Camden's strange, rainy streets with its neon doner kebab menus and hawker's leftovers scattered on tar like the Milky Way. It was way past midnight. They crossed the road slowly, savouring the absence of traffic. On the other side a broken circle of drivers and dealers feebly hawked their trips to anywhere else but there.

Like fireflies they moved into the light of the all-night street canteen and he bought the coffee. Her pockets were bulging with tips from too many tapas orders, but, in that moment, his

chivalry seemed to matter and she forgot her bruised feet. Until dawn they'd be king and queen of that kingdom of remains.

They hovered for a moment at the bus stop. A man was standing there in the rain with his briefcase. He was shaved and showered and ready for work. Waiting for the bus. He didn't question being there. That's was just the way it was. That was what he did at that time of the morning. But they could move. They did not need the shelter. The rain was not their enemy. So they walked on through it, delighting in its wetness. Taxis passed.

The daytime merchants of sunglasses and leather jackets had gone; their goods locked on the inside behind corrugated iron sheets. And they were silent or snoring now, beneath softer covers. Dreaming their dreams of stoves and hearths and deserts and wars in other countries they once called home. This was their street now, cabbage leaves and tube passes trodden to a sod on the tarmac. The ancient marketplace had triumphed over other shopping prerogatives. With their ghetto blasters and good deals they had claimed the territory. And, in their absence, the Third World was emerging like a closet Phoenix from that dimly lit London street. It was their place now.

He felt at home. He lived in that place out of place, that other people's England. And he was walking with her through his world. He knew each and every building and how it cut its shape into the sky from the graffitied urban earth. She was a stranger to him and the place. He was generous with what he had to be generous with: a sad, old second-hand England. He was walking home along his familiar track, but noticing all things anew in the freshness of the pre-dawn drizzle.

She was destination's orphan. Just going along. And step by step ... doorway by doorway ... brick by brick ... word by word ... the world opened to their trundling progression. She felt strangely at home walking his turf. She recognised the decay. Knew how to feel safe in a deserted street. These were the tactics of her own city. The dissolution was familiar.

It was the other part that intrigued her -- the English part, the Western scaffolding on which it all hung. She'd been told that these were her roots. This was her mother's land. But she couldn't feel it in her veins. It was through recordings that she knew this England. Its images had come to her through celluloid and print. And now her jumbled memory of second-hand things was coming to life in drugged waves of recognition as she stumbled on with him along the high street.

It seemed to take her 20 minutes to light a single cigarette because her hands couldn't get it together. Her nerves were in a soup -- fried and frazzled with delight. The nicotine stick was soaked with rain, but the desire for fire was strong.

They talked abstractly about the threat of being mugged. Then realised it was such a serious possibility that it was funny and they roared with laughter. Roared against the dingy dawn that was paradise to both muggers and meanderers. They moved through the half light towards the bridge, taking in odd details of the morning – a single shoe, a dog's collar...

They could feel the downpour. Coat's soaked, hair dripping and shoe soles all slippery against the ground. They crossed the bridge and wound their way along the water's bed. Everything was suddenly liquid -- their minds, the sky and the Lock. Beyond language, they were still laughing at themselves and the lovely strangeness of a world that was always there. Waiting every day to be noticed in that way. And in the heaving wateriness of the Lock and the persistent rain and their scrambled brains they laughed and laughed till they pissed themselves laughing. There on the cobbled path, cock to the river and cunt to the street. Man and woman pissing out their respective accumulations of history. The moment's primitives stumbling back to being in the streets of Camden at the end of the 20th century. And it felt good.

She stumbled out of the taxi and into her bed at about 6am. Three hours later she woke up. It was early spring and instead of lingering in the warmth of her bed, she got up instantly and headed out into the morning. She passed houses where others had just risen from their bed

of dreams. The milkman had delivered the milk, which sat cold and white on some doorsteps, ready for toast and tea and the rituals of morning. She was surprised that there were still milkmen in this world, but then remembered again that she was in England. It felt like a Noddy book compared to where she'd come from.

She walked to a common where men in Macintoshes were drifting around ponds, setting up umbrellas and fishing rods in front of signs declaring: "No fishing allowed". A woman in a caravan was frying up bacon for English breakfasts for the morning's stragglers. She walked on and on beneath the grey-blue sky, remembering and wandering, feeling happy and sad. On mornings like this one, she knew solidly, without resistance, that she wouldn't have it any other way. This is just the place for my nowhere self, she thought. It's a city that favours invisibility. And she smoked one cigarette very slowly before returning home to start her day for real.

WHEN HOME HAD AN ADDRESS

There was once a time when home was a place with an address. All the post arrived there, and the telephone number stayed the same for so long, she thought it would always be that way. She still remembers the number: 843-005. A big double-storey house it was, at the top of a hill.

TALKING TO STRANGERS

From somewhere further inside, around the next corner, deeper into the dirty heart the old city, she can hear a muezzin. She wants to follow the sound to get to the source of his cry. But she is caught in a complex negotiation with a soft-skinned man who is gently touching her as she verbally resists him. Feeling his smooth hands between her thighs, her words cease to make sense. He is in her pants, making his way into her dark centre and she has forgotten his name. A pulse of shame draws her attention back to the muezzin who is still beckoning with his winding cry. Whether he is calling her away from the man or further into the dream is hard to tell.

But now the church bells are loudly ringing, chiming their way over everything, and the olive-skinned man is no longer there. He has left the room and the city. She is still inside herself, but out of the dream now -- being summoned back to the whiteness of the small hotel room. The bells usher in the dusky golden light falling onto her through the muslin curtains.

As she returns reluctantly to the world, she feels momentarily sick with her own mortality. Instant panic. What time is it? She is Pavlov's dog -- her mouth dry, her skin hot and wet. Must be late for work. Where am I? Is somebody watching me? Sudden relief as she remembers that she is on Crete. Away from everyone and everything she is bound to.

In July she wound up her last big project, ditched half her belongings and moved out of her rented apartment. August was devoted to small commissions and tying up loose ends. Her birthday party doubled as a farewell bash. She partied with the stragglers till the early morning, talking in foreign accents and dancing around an empty club on the Melville main drag in a battered fedora. When the DJ finally stopped playing and Greg suggested calling his dealer for a gram of cocaine, she left, kwaito beats still thumping in her head.

The church bells continue to chime. When she hears the knives and forks being laid out on the tables of the taverna beneath her balcony, she gets up. She is hungry. Needs to walk and breathe -- see people eating, flirting, making deals... As she rises, her book falls to the floor: *My Secret History*. A thick tome of a thing, all battered and dog-eared.

The book has a hold on her. In the late afternoons she returns to the hotel room, quickly sheds her clothes and sprawls out beneath the fresh white sheets. She reads for a while and then starts to dream. She sleeps and returns, half awake, half dreaming until awake becomes the dream and this life, this city, is as foreign as the one that plays itself out on the inner screens of her eyes. She wrenches herself loose from an absurdity of circumstances to return to the room, the bed and the noises in the street below. Knives clink against forks more vigorously, signaling the end of the quiet afternoon and the beginning of something else.

She rises and slips into a pair of sequinned sandals and a purple skirt. She splashes her face with water, applies mascara, lipstick, a spritz of perfume and leaves the room wondering if her dreams have left her smelling of sex.

On the way down the whining wooden staircase, she spots the American couple from the photography course sitting at a table in the pension's downstairs café. She thinks of quickly turning and making her way back up the stairs, but it's too late. They have spotted her.

"Alice!" announces the wife.

"Well, I'll be damned, Gloria. It's the South African girl," bellows the husband.

"Where have you been? You missed the trip to the Lefka Ori mountains. We waited for you this morning, but you never came."

"I'm sorry," she bumbles, like a schoolgirl discovered bunking assembly - hiding out in the music room. Her ears turn red. "I decided I wanted to get some shots around the harbour front this morning."

"So you stayed in Hania?" asks the husband, amazed at her transgression. "You missed out on some fine views, girly."

"Yeah," says the wife. "Latham got some great shots of the valley..."

"And of the Cretans in their traditional get up..."

"And Steve organised for us to have lunch in one of those cute little mountain tavernas. The food was real good... Moussaka, taramasalata, olives - you name it."

"So you will be joining us for dinner tonight, won't you? We're going to that place on the waterfront where we had swordfish souvlaki..."

"Actually, I thought I'd spend the evening alone. I ... I have some postcards to write."

"Oh."

"Well, okay then. We'll let Steve know that you've decided to do your own thing again then."

"Thanks. That's kind of you. Well enjoy your evening. Thank you," she says, trying to sound like a nice, well brought up girl from Durban North.

"Bye," they chorus, but she is already outside the old wooden front door of the Hotel Nostos and a few steps down the street.

"*Kalispera* Lady. *Parakalo, parakalo,* you will like some of our tasty *mezedes* tonight? Some pickled octopus, some dolmades maybe?" insists a young Greek tout outside the Apostolis Taverna.

"No," she snaps. "I mean, thank you, no..."

"Come in lovely lady, *parakalo.* Have a little glass of ouzo -- on the house."

"Maybe next time," she answers, stepping up her pace.

"So we'll see you later," he replies, unabashedly running his eyes over her body. As she turns the corner, she hears him start up again: "Taste our mezedes, the best in Hania. The best for you tonight."

Wandering along the streets of Hania, she stares into jewellery shop windows, but avoids the eyes of strangers. She longs to be bold enough to claim something from this night. Has told the Greek she met at the dance club last night that she will stop by his restaurant for a raki later, but the night is still young. Decisiveness is necessary. She is not strong enough for the options of the streets. She must eat.

Quickly she returns to a place called Tamam, just down from the Hotel Nostos in the old quarter. As soon as she enters, she knows she has made the right decision. The place is below street level, built into the ruined bathing chambers of an old Turkish hamam. The time-textured walls are adorned with oriental seductresses from old cigarette adverts.

It occurs to her, as she sips her raki, that she is intensely drawn to the Semitic and Ottoman layerings of the town. This is the life that has been repressed here, she suspects. Forced underground by centuries of legislation and war. She has not read the history books, but recognises the signs from her own broken country. The blotting out of something that refuses to go away.

Every morning, lolling about the harbour front, she stops alongside the white horses with their carriages in front of the old Turkish mosque that is now an art gallery.

She spent the entire morning in a tiny reconstructed synagogue, torn down by the Germans in World War II. There she found a recipe book celebrating the multiculturalism that had once thrived in cities like Thessaloniki, and even in smaller places like Hania.

The book was co-written by the shul's pluralist rabbi and a flamboyant-looking diva, who lived in Istanbul. The actress had grown up in a family that observed both Muslim and Jewish traditions. In the recipe book Alice came upon old sepia photographs of the woman's family wearing fezzes at the linen-covered Friday night shabat table. Fezzes and magandoveds... She remembered Robert Sadiki, the Lemba schoolteacher she met in Gazankulu years ago. "I am Christian and Jewish under the same moon," he told her.

Now, as the night gets inkier and she gets giddier, scribbling in her diary as she consumes raki and baba ganoush, Alice recalls the images of this formidable kohl-eyed diva and longs to track her down for a rendezvous at the Grand Bazaar. Gazing at the raunchy dames in the cigarette adverts, she wishes she were sitting naked in a steamy bathhouse being pummeled by the strong hands of a Turkish crone.

At around 10pm she pays the bill and heads for the waterfront to meet Theo. She hesitates before entering the Amfora taverna where he is head waiter.

"What's the point?" she thinks. "This is going nowhere." But he spots her before she has a chance to turn around and become last night's ghost. The place is relatively quiet which means he can drink with her freely.

"Cheers to the queen because she's not a human being," he laughs, knocking back his first gulp of raki. He is silly and bold, and she likes his quips. His skin is dark and his hair, sleek black. They drink and talk. She asks him about the Turkish influences in his town. He tells her he has nothing against Jews, but he hates the Turks because they killed his family.

"When did they kill your family?" she asks, shocked.

"150 years after the death of Christ," he responds.

"Jesus! That's a long time to harbour hatred. Have you met any Turks lately?"

He says he has served them in the restaurant. They come here on holiday. He has been to Turkey on holiday. But he grew up hating Turks. From a young age he was taught to hate Turks. It's part of being Cretan. He tells her it was the Germans who killed the Jews, but he didn't mind that because they left lots of good properties and shops behind for the Cretans.

"You nationalist!" she shouts.

Mistaking her declaration for combative foreplay, he laughs. And yes, she is partly in love with his certainty, his pride in being part of a tribe. But her tribeless self is appalled, trying to black out baths of blood as she takes her last sip of raki and lights yet another cigarette in quick

succession from the last. It is closing time and Theo joins the other waiter, taking the cloths off of the tables and throwing them across the room onto a single heap like clockwork. She cannot bear to sit here any longer. She tells him she is leaving. Stay, he says. She cannot. He says she he will meet her at the end of the pier, at the old Venetian lighthouse. She leaves without responding.

She walks and walks in the cool night air, along the water's edge, past the old mosque, past the post office and the moored boats. Black/White, Greek/ Turk, she says to herself. You can't get away from it. It's the same wherever you go. Black/White, Greek/Turk, Man/Woman, Work/Play, she continues, turning it into a drunken mantra for hopscotch. The lighthouse flashes red as the last few diners at the harbour-side cafés call for their bills. She steps up onto the old Venetian fortress wall and starts walking along it, outwards towards the darkness and the indiscernible horizon.

Her time on Crete's western shores is drawing to an end. She is due to board the Minoan Lines ferry in Iraklio in two days time. Her plan was to take the ferry back to Athens, stopping off at a few other islands on the way. But now she has doubts. She can't get the recent ferry disaster out of her mind.

At the end of the pier, she stops for a few seconds watching the sea lash up against the wall and the waves lapping all about her. She breathes in the cold salty air and feels her hair slapping up against her cheeks in the wind. Her anger and desire grows more acute with each flash of the lighthouse and the solitary buzz of each distant motorbike. But she does not wait. She turns and heads back to the hotel. It is time to leave this town.

The next morning, at a hole-in-the-wall café in the rowdy Hania food market, staring at a bucket full of spiced octopus tentacles, she tries to unravel her options. The CNN reports keep surfacing: A second ferry disaster, so soon after the first... When she tries to picture herself basking languorously amidst the azure blues and pristine whites of the islands, she cannot see herself absorbing the slowness and ease of it all. An urgency has overcome her. Holiday leisure

makes no sense. She cannot bear the constant parade of surfaces. Wants to rip the postcard to get to the grit beneath it.

She has never traveled to a Muslim country. But she's heard the stories about the lecherousness of men in Islamic states. Men pinching your backside and constantly badgering you for intimate meetings beyond the public gaze. She has always taken these stories with a mound of salt. But will she be safe on her own, she wonders, resenting the very question.

She notices that she is surrounded by men. There isn't a single woman in the place. The women are hurrying by with children and bags of vegetables, haggling with the old man across the way about the price of fish. That will be me one day, she thinks, while old and young Greek men sit all around her chewing Pistachio nuts, drinking thick black coffee and playing backgammon.

She is 32 years old, single and among the men now, doing very little for hours on end, shooting the breeze and allowing time to tick slowly by. She has often sought out and savoured the company of men, downplaying her femininity in favour of a kind of genderless neutrality. For a moment, she feels remarkably at home in this setting. Quite happy and safe, drinking her coffee, reading and minding her own business, like a man. Only for a moment though. Silly girl, she thinks to herself. You're a woman and you don't have any choice in the matter. They see you. You are not one of them.

Almost in defiance, she finishes her coffee, runs to the nearest travel agent and books herself a ticket to Istanbul on her credit card. I'll do the sums later, she thinks lightly, not realising that the next four years of her life will be devoted to paying off First National Bank.

She says her goodbyes to the American couple and the organiser of the photographic course. They do not exchange addresses. Before leaving, she manages to get one telephone number from an old copy of the *Rough Guide to Turkey* lying around in the hotel foyer. It is for the Orient Hostel in Sultanahmet.

The Orient turns out to be just around the corner from the swanky Four Seasons Hotel. The porter at the front desk tells her the hotel was built on the ruins of the old prison where Alan Parker's *Midnight Express* was shot. She remembers the film with unease.

She locks away her suitcase, keeping only a few necessities, which she lays down on the bottom level of a bunk in a rowdy mixed-sex dorm. Packed with hard-drinking Australians, the hostel is a far cry from her quiet sanctum at the Hotel Nostos. She soon discovers that the toilets do not boast flushing water, but comforts herself with the thought that she is only footsteps away from two of the most magnificent buildings in the whole wide world: Haghia Sophia and the Blue Mosque. From the hostel's rooftop café she watches the ships coming in on the Bosphorus, the river that runs between the Western and Eastern worlds. I am here, she tells herself, over and over. I have unexpectedly arrived in the city of my dreams.

But on her first walk into the city, she quickly discovers that it is true what they say about Turkish men. She spends half of every minute dissuading potential suitors. As soon as she manages to get rid of one Casanova, the next is upon her, inviting her for apple tea, trying to persuade her to take a walk through the lush gardens of the Hippodrome and listen to a bit of Persian love poetry beneath the Egyptian Obelisk. The men are never crass or aggressive in their approach. Insistent, yes, but not macho. She has never encountered such frequent, subtle and poetic attempts at instant public seduction.

One morning, she tries taking a walk to the Basilica Cistern wearing a skirt. It is mayhem. She hasn't got beyond the gardens of the Blue Mosque, when she decides there is no other option but to return to the hostel and put on some long pants.

On her second evening in Istanbul, she decides to treat herself to a visit to the Cemberlitas Hamam. After a session of steaming, soaping and massage beneath an iridescent dome, she floats out of the baths onto Divanyolu Caddesi, the central boulevard and tram line.

From behind her, she hears the words: "Excuse me, are your feet sore?" On the contrary, she thinks, my feet feel like they've been caressed by Mary Magdalene. She is intoxicated by fragrant steam, dizzy with the spell of bodily rejuvenation.

"No," she replies, her guard slipping. "Why?"

"Because," responds the young Anatolian Lothario, quickening his pace so that he is now walking alongside her: "The whole of last night you were walking through my dreams." He has hardly the beginnings of a beard, but she allows him to escort her to a rooftop café with a view over the domes and minarets. They order meze and limeflower tea and he tells her his story.

"I come from a small village. But to make my life, I have to leave. There is nothing there for the young people. It is poor and dry. Life is hard."

"Where is your home?"

"In the mountains. You have heard of Anatolia?"

"Yes, but not much more than the name."

"I return one summer -- two years past... It was good to see my grandmother. We sat around the fire under stars and she weaves for us magic stories so beautiful, like the patterns of the carpets I show you tomorrow... But my life is here now. In Istanbul. There is no carpet for my story here. I am outside of the weave, you understand?"

He tells her he washed dishes and scrubbed floors in the city for years, before he could buy his first suit and wangle his way into a respectable carpet business. But now he has enough money to enjoy the pleasures of city life -- to live it up a bit. But there is no one to live it up with. Most of the girls are still homebound, under the watchful eye of their mothers -- whiling away their time in the domestic realm waiting for their suitable boys. But young urban Turks don't want to be forced into instant marriage. They want to explore, meet different women, have adventures...

"Is this is a crime?" he asks her. "Is it a sin to have desire?"

They part before the sun is fully down and meet up again the following afternoon. He shows her around the carpet shop where he works explaining some of the basic motifs in the weaves, but his intentions are clear. She has no desire to tease him and he no desire to be her friend. So it ends before it has begun.

But she can't stop mulling over his story. "Turkish men are more Westernized and urbanized than Turkish women," she writes in her diary. "But, when they finally get to look and feel like the guy in the Diesel advert, they discover it's an exceptionally solitary place to be. Their female counterparts are still behind the veil." She starts to view these men in a new light, seeing beyond their lecherousness to their loneliness. She tries to imagine herself as a man and finds herself craving the intimacy of nakedness.

It is in the Grand Bazaar that she meets Fahrettin Polat. He is wearing a cream linen suit and talking to two Australian girls who are trying to avoid having to buy whatever trinket he is enticing them into. As she stands by, surveying the intricate designs in a mock İznik bowl, she starts to appreciate the subtlety of his humour. They clearly view him as yet another Turkish tout, but his quips and expressions are so witty the joke seems to fall on them. Yes, I'm a tout, he seems to be saying between the lines, but there are layers and centuries of contradiction beyond that that you two frivolous girls will never understand.

Before long she is sitting in Fahrettin's carpet shop. His smooth skin is the rarest colour: somehow olive and marble at once. What a gullible tourist I am, she thinks. He wants to take her on a date. He wants to take her over the river to Beyoğlu, to experience "the real Istanbul", to show her "things regular tourists will never ever get to see". Is this not what she asked for — almost in his very words? And yet, coming from his mouth, they are laced with danger.

"You have to trust me," he says. "If you want to truly know the magic of this city, you have to believe."

Charmed by a carpet seller. She laughs at herself, sipping her "complimentary" glass of apple tea. But if you don't take the risk, you'll never see beyond the brochure. Step into the cliché, she tells herself. Upon pain of death, step beyond the fucking brochure. Live the cliché like you own it. If you don't take a risk, there will be no story. And without a story, why live?

He seems to be tracking her thoughts as she thinks them: "But then again perhaps you should be cautious," he jokes. "I am an Arab man and I could sell you into the slave trade."

She loathes herself for reducing him to this ridiculous stereotype. Give him the opportunity to be human, she tells herself. Give yourself the opportunity to believe.

"Right," he says. "I am delighted. I will collect you outside the Orient at 7pm. You will not regret your decision."

He arrives in a taxi. Still not rich enough to own his own car, he lives at home with his mother and sister, whom he supports with his work in the carpet store. As they cross over to the other side of the city, she feels her heart racing. The fumes are intense, but from the bridge she can see the twinkling immensity of the great East/West metropolis. Edging their way through thick nighttime traffic, they head up the steep hill north of the Golden Horn.

"During the Ottoman time, Jews from Spain, Arabs, Greeks and Armenians settled here," he tells her.

"Yes," she says, thinking: This is exactly what the rabbi and the actress from the recipe book in Hania were talking about. This is the pluralism they were trying to save.

As they jump out of the taxi into throngs of young Turks promenading along the pedestrianized İstiklal Caddesi, Fahrettin points out the "Pera Palas" to her – "the hotel where Agatha Christie used to stay". They wander down Beyoglu's main street, an electric boulevard lined with 19th century apartment blocks and European embassy buildings. They stop to take in an outside exhibition of photographs of the artistic life of Beyoğlu in the 1930s.

"It reminds me of the Left Bank in Paris," she tells Fahrettin.

"You like this?" he smiles. "Just wait until you see where we are going tonight..." and he whisks her into an antique black-and-white tiled alleyway. The wood-panelled *meyhanes* lining the passageway are packed with young Turks eating, drinking and enjoying Friday night.

"It used to be flower market, but now it's a social place. I come here most weekends."

She follows him through the velvet curtains of one of these boho eateries. The manager is a friend of Fahrettin's and they are welcomed with open arms. Their silver jug is constantly topped up with berry-rich wine as they slowly devour miniature platefuls of every Turkish delicacy under the sun. Somewhere between the Bamya bastisi and the Hünkar beğendili köfte a traditional *fasir* quartet begins to play Anatolian gypsy music.

A special request is made for a man, seated at a table near theirs, to get up and sing. The man is a patron at this restaurant. He does not sing professionally, Fahrettin tells her, but everybody knows that his voice is nothing less than a gift from God.

"When he sings the world is a better place."

Initially, the singer puts up a mock resistance, but the people know he is fooling and flatter him by begging. Finally, he joins the musicians and begins to sing. Soon he has the whole restaurant on its feet, singing impassioned folksongs of love lost and found, wars lost and won. Everyone is joining arms and singing and clapping along to the sound of the violin, *kanun*, *tambur* and *ut*. Everyone seems to know the words. Alice is the only one who is not singing along, but the vibrations of voice are moving through her so powerfully, it is as if she is dissolving into the song. I have dreamed this night, she tells herself. This is where I was meant to come to.

In the early hours of morning, they cross the river back to Sultanahmet. Fahrettin wants to take her to the café where the whirling dervishes spin. When they get there the place is closing, but the waiter brings them two glasses of tea and they sit together watching the stars fade over

the Blue Mosque. Both of them have become silent with the inevitability of touch and, in their rising desire, they are equals.

At the front desk of a seedy hotel, they ignore the raised eyebrows of the night porter and take the lift that carries them upwards.

Taking in the obscure light of dawn on the 12th floor, she wonders how life can possibly get better. It doesn't occur to her that, from that height, it is more likely to get worse.

The next day they shower and depart. As they pass through the hotel foyer, she tries to avert the glances of the cleaning lady and the day porter that say "cheap Western woman of loose morals". They go to a neighbourhood spot Fahrettin knows, order eggs and focus on the football match on TV, knowing that their time together is coming to an end.

Afterwards they stroll slowly through the gardens in front of the Blue Mosque on the way back to the hostel. It is a beautiful day. The sky is immaculately blue. The grass is ridiculously green. And then it happens.

She notices a bright red splash on Fahrettin's white shirt and, when she looks up at his face, she realises it is coming from his nose. He tries holding a tissue to it, but soon it is drenched in blood. At first Fahrettin remains calm.

"I've had nosebleeds before," he says, trying to make light of it. But the luminous red liquid is now pouring from his face in gushing streams. Groups of veiled, covered women pass them by. A beggar man notices them struggling and lays Fahrettin down on the grass facing the flat sky. But his shirt is now drenched in blood. The man starts talking to Alice urgently in Turkish.

"What is he saying?" she asks Fahrettin, who is disappearing into a silent funk. She tries to utter words of comfort, running her fingers through his dark hair, and clambering about in her bag for another tissue, as the man's voice trails off. She is left alone with Fahrettin. It is less the

stream of blood that concerns her than the dark intermittent clots thickening the streams of red. These clots speak to her of brain tumours and other unknown terrors.

"We've got to get to a hospital," she says, over and over. "We really need to get to a hospital."

"Yes," he says, in a nervous daze. "I'll call my friend."

He calls his friend. His friend calls back, the jaunty ring tone of his cell phone mocking the moment. He calls his friend again, but half an hour later his friend still hasn't arrived. Time seems to be stuck still, frozen in panic under the immaculate blue sky.

"Come on," she says to Fahrettin. "We're going to the hospital."

"Okay."

As they walk up to Divanyolu Caddesi, people stare at them in a way that seems blank and unapologetic. There are no other Turkish men with Western women on this street and this Turkish man is covered in blood. A police car slows down to observe them, and then starts speeding up again. She runs after it banging on the boot for them to stop. When they do, Alice explains in slow, stressed English that they need help.

"We ... need ... to ... get ... to ... a ... hospital ... fast."

She sounds ridiculous. Like her mother used to sound when giving instructions to the Zulu staff of the family-run hotel. As a child, Alice used to cower behind the reception desk blotting out her view of the varnished collage of European holiday resorts that decorated the hotel's entrance, trying to pretend she wasn't there. Richard, the hotel chef or Joseph, the handyman, both big noble-statured black men, would stand there, wringing their hands and folding their shoulders inwards to make themselves smaller as her mother enunciated each and every word. Spoken in this way, her words had an inexplicable kind of power beyond their sense. Her mother seemed to grow larger as she spoke.

"You ... must ... rub ... the silver ... with ... a ... cloth ... to ... get ... all ... the ... Silvo ... polish ... off. Do ... you ... understand ... me?"

The Turkish police get Fahrettin and Alice to a hospital, but it is another hour before they get to see a nurse. The nurse wants to know how they know each other. She looks at Alice's face and then her eyes run slowly down her body over her breasts and stomach, along her thighs and down her calves to her feet.

"What ... are ... you ... two ... doing ... together?"

"How ... did ... the ... nose ... bleed ... start?"

The nurse is talking to her like her mother used to speak to black people. Now she is the dumb fool who doesn't understand. Every doctor, nurse and orderly surveys her with the same upsetting cocktail of suspicion and aloofness. They start at a small casualty hospital downtown and then take a taxi to the huge suburban general hospital.

"You don't have to come with me. Maybe you've seen enough of the real Istanbul now," jokes Fahrettin, weakly.

"It's what I wanted. You've kept your promise," says Alice gently, taking his hand in hers. "Thank you."

The moment she steps through the sliding doors she is overcome by the familiar hanging smell of yesterday's antiseptic trapped in the badly circulating air of the massive block of Fifties concrete. Alice's mother died on the second floor of a sprawling hospital just like this one. How did Addington Hospital get to Istanbul? she wonders. The sight of her sequinned sandals on the yellow and grey linoleum floor brings on a quiet, gut-wrenching bout of hysteria.

Welcome home, she thinks to herself. Welcome to life on the other side of the postcard.

Struggling through the sickly residue of last night's vodka, they fill in form after form, Alice attempting to explain Fahrettin's symptoms and he translating through nosefuls of soggy

cotton wool. They are sent from ward to ward in search of a doctor who can help them. They wait together on a metal bench for an hour.

Finally the doctor calls Fahrettin's name: "Polat... Fahrettin Polat?" He enters the warm, carpeted room and the door closes, leaving Alice alone on the bench in the long, shiny hospital passageway. It doesn't matter where she is anymore. She feels like she is 18 again, scuffing her sandals against the floor and longing for a world with no borders and no hospitals, where love never has to come to an end.