

THE TRUSTEES

Hagen Rolf Engler was born in Bloemfontein, South Africa in 1971. He grew up in Port Elizabeth in the Eastern Cape and was educated at Grey High and Rhodes University. He began work as a newspaper reporter, and his first book, *Life's A Beach*, was a collection of columns. This was followed by *Water Features*, *Magnum Chic*, and his first novel, *Greener Grass*. These, and his next novel, *Buttons For Gaia*, as well as *Comrade Baby* were self-published.

After spending 2002 in Cape Town, he moved to Johannesburg, where he became editor of the magazine *FHM* in 2006. He left the magazine in 2012, and returned to writing, quickly publishing several books, including *Marrying Black Girls For Guys Who Aren't Black*, *Stuff White People Like*, and the novel *In The Maid's Room*, which was longlisted for the Sunday Times Barry Ronge fiction prize in 2017. He married Nomfundo Engler in 2008, and they had one daughter, Liso, in 2012, before divorcing in 2017.

He performs as a word artist – solo and with groups including Jedi Rollers, The Near Misses and The Feel So Strongs. He remains engaged in music, writing and media projects, and still lives and works in Johannesburg.

By the same author

Non-Fiction

Life's A Beach (1997)

Water Features (1998)

Magnum Chic (1999)

Planetary Vehicles (2009)

Comrade Baby (2012)

Marrying Black Girls For Guys Who Aren't Black (2013)

Stuff (South African) White People Like (2014)

*Black Twitter, Blitz & A Boerie As Long As Your Leg
(2018)*

Novels

Greener Grass (2000)

Buttons For Gaia (2006)

In The Maid's Room (2016)

Other

Strippers And Other Bullshit (with Morne Swart)

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HAGEN ENGLER

The Trustees

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Hagen's House

www.hagenshouse.com

hagen@hagenshouse.com

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THE TRUSTEES

This book is for you.

Thank you.

THE TRUSTEES

Ting!

Ting!

Ting!

Ting!

Ting!

Ting!

Ting!

Ting!

Then a pause, before the insistent chant of metal upon metal resumed. Of a frequency where its source could not be identified, the sound was simultaneously everywhere and nowhere.

At times he had thought it was coming from the gate. It could plausibly pass for the sound of a knife on the rustproofed steel of the security barrier.

Perhaps it was the sensation of two metal stakes being beaten together. The kind surveyors might have used to mark up levels on a piece of ground during the time before.

You would sink the stake into the soft, dry, warm soil, he remembered. Drive it in there with a hammer.

“*Kom, Mabhut!* *Jy kan slaan,*” he would ask the strongest of the workers. “*Slaan jy hom vir my.*” You’re the strongest. *You* hammer it in!

Ting!

Ting!

Ting!

Ting!

The hammer would resound across the site, the sound muffled only slightly by the soil, and the resigned inevitability of the workers

They would determine the level with the help of the theodolite, the tacky, and mark it up with a length of red masking tape. Then they would consult the plans, find the location of the next level, and trudge across the site to stake it out.

They would mark levels the length and breadth of the site, giving form to the vision of some engineer, some architect who had determined how this development would look. Some person who might have visited the site once, on a location visit.

He would have divided up the land, parcelled it out, drawn notional lines across it. Designed it. But they had been the ones to actually draw these lines across the physical landscape.

They did it with plant, earthmoving machinery; bulldozers, front-end loaders, the JCB, the Mercedes tip

truck. The grader would come in at the end of the process to level the land. But only at the very end, because the land resists levelling.

He had noticed early on that the land was not level, and levelness was not its natural state. It was undulating, riven with features, fissures and crevices. Snake holes, rats' nests, the half-buried rubble of some former generation's attempt to impose itself on the land, but which had been reclaimed and consumed by the earth.

And now came their turn, the chance of their motley band of pragmatists to set the levels and to try to link them up with soil, to connect the dots across the landscape until they formed some kind of matrix, a web of links crissing, crossing and criss-crossing the stand at a certain rigid altitude, until the land lay bound beneath them, captured, imprisoned by these lines they had drawn, these graded levels of soil. The living soil would be torn from its slumber and mangled, physically ground up, the worms gasping as the air scalded their flesh, the roots of trees flailing for purchase, black rocks from deep in the earth, protesting against the violence of the steel choreography that demanded submission. You will be levelled, it said. But it never quite was.

You could level the land, but in the end, the land would level you, he had realised. The old foundations he constantly found bore witness to this truth. Generations before, some other foreman, or perhaps a farmer with

another team of men with no alternative, had also imposed his vision on the landscape. But as the rocks, the mangled metal of former doorframes, the scorched chimney bricks that erupted between the teeth of the bulldozer... as they proved, it would always be the land's vision that triumphed.

The land worked to a different rhythm. Man's interruptions would be but brief.

But man was nothing if not proud. Like a child convinced of his own understanding, he persisted. And the sound of steel against steel was the sound of that hubris.

Ting!

Ting!

Ting!

Ting!

Ting!

And now it was everywhere. That foolish pride had consumed the neighbourhood. That was the sound of man's utter, irrefutable conviction that he mattered. That somehow, somewhere, somewhen, what he did made some difference. The earth bore witness to a different truth, but man lived his life above the earth, as if beneath the surface of the ocean, while the earth's undulations played out over eons. The people had

convinced themselves that their timeframe, their epoch, their little splash upon the surface was lasting, because they had seen it.

But existence will play out at the speed of earth. Especially here on earth. The earth is the why, the wherefore, the because. There is only earth. Despite the tricks that our consciousness plays on us, even *we* are earth, he knew. And whatever dance we dance with each other is but a facet of our earthly state. Our state as earth people.

Whatever dance we dance. He was losing the meaning he had once placed on these dances. It had always been silly, so contrived, the attempts to build significance into the interactions of the earth people, the pretence that they were people – somehow something separate – and not just earth after all.

Now he no longer knew. But not only did he not know, he did not believe. He could not any longer bring himself to feel any preference for any outcome. How would things work out in this split second of earth's imperceptible, inexorable trajectory? How would this little, temporary end be, en route to the ultimate end, when our bones, our metal, our rocks are again consumed by the earth, and she lies calm and undulating again?

All he knew was that the sound of steel against steel was the sound of this epoch, and it was everywhere. It

was every day, every night, every waking thought. Whatever they did there in their patch of land, this attempt at permanence, it all happened in a moment of steel against steel.

Ting!

Ting!

Ting!

Ting!

Ting!

Ting!

“Did you hear them last night? Asked Leon. “I’m sure they were right at the gate.”

“No, they were in Katherine Street,” he said, trying to convince himself. “If they were here, we would have heard their voices.”

“I *did* hear them,” said Leon mentioning their neighbours. “They tried to get in at the Stables. They say they got in over the electric fence from Katherine and come in through the back. They say they beat them off with the axe handles.”

The axe handles had become the weapon of choice. Not axes, axe handles. You needed something light enough to be manoeuvrable, but thick, firm and dense

enough to make an impact. To shatter a jaw with one blow; to break a shin; to stun a person quickly into unconsciousness so you could face the next adversary, as there inevitably was.

The days of individualism were also behind them. Those quaint, old days of self-determination, when they had deluded themselves that they were somehow tough, rugged and headstrong enough to navigate the world alone, without assistance.

After it happened, it soon became clear that individuals were sitting ducks, weak targets, lone prey. If you did not have a clan amongst whom to seek refuge, you were dead. At best, you wanted a tribe, a whole nation to which you could swear allegiance. But in the absence of that, in the quick, chaotic consolidation that happened, you clung to those around you, wherever you were at the time. You fell in with your neighbours, your colleagues, your fellow travellers in this moment.

You consolidated, you defined your territory and you protected it. You fled, you fought your way back to your home and you defended yourself. And so, they had been thrown together, when it happened, when everything stopped.

The guard had vanished, and thus he had found himself out in the driveway, a hacksaw and a knife in his hands, already wild eyed with terror, nursing that gnawing fear in the gut that would never again leave. He had been there, with a saw and a knife and a Taser, the

last feeble charge had been enough to fight off the gang of boys as they tried to raise the gate from its hinges and gain entry, beating their hammers and chair legs against the trashcans that functioned as shields, as he had shocked them back, their hands grabbing at the gate.

They would be back, and by the time that happened, the gate must be a rampart. Every heavy, large object within the complex would have to be used to reinforce it. They would need to station themselves on the walls, for a vantage point and the better to fight them back. They would need to do it fast, whoever they were.

They had begun finding each other in the driveway that day. Terrified, armed and desperate. He and Leon had met. A middle-aged man and an older one, in the autumn of his years. Leon held the wheel spanner of a Toyota Corolla and one half of a paving brick.

“Everything’s gone off,” he said. “The power’s off, the landline... I’ve got no reception... You haven’t got internet, have you?”

“No. Everything’s off.”

“What have you got, though?”

“How do you mean?”

“What have you got to defend yourself with? You got a gun?”

“No. I’ve got this thing.” He waved the dying Taser. “My lady has some pepper spray.”

He immediately regretted mentioning the woman. Jamina had not left the unit since it happened. Now she was agitating to come out and fight. She would, but at least they had managed to get her home alive first. When it had happened, that October afternoon, when everything went down in a way it never had before, everything at once. Within minutes he had known, it's not coming back on this time. He'd got into his car and gone to find her.

By the grace of god, she had still been at work. And all the way there, he had felt the chaos encroaching. Every intersection on the verge of gridlock. The robot people more brazen, armed with rocks, some of them. Two kays from her office the roads were no longer passable. Jammed with abandoned vehicles. People on foot. Survivors? Predators? Victims? Trying to work that out for themselves, in real time.

"Come, we need to get home," he had said, staggering into her office, out of breath.

"I know." she said. "Shall I drive behind you?"

"No. The roads aren't working. We need to go now." Like a pot rises to boiling point, you could already sense the steam that day. The end of order. At Jamina's office, the men were ransacking the place already, leaving the storeroom clutching tins of coffee, the coffee creamer. The canteen was being looted of furniture. Already it was clear what would constitute currency in the days ahead. Food. Weapons. Tools.

He cast about for a weapon and settled for a trophy, some award for agency work, Best Integrated Campaign, in the gilded shape of an eagle. He grabbed Jamina's hand and they left.

The security boom was a futile bottleneck and beyond, more gridlocked traffic, with urban combat in the streets. They were ten kays from home, their only hope of refuge, and they would have to fight every metre of the way.

At the exit gate, he paused to gather his wits, and found a man at his shoulder. Already the panic was real. People could not function. Two steps onto the pavement a man ran at them, shrieking. In panic or attack, it didn't matter. Caleb smashed him in the head with this trophy. Best Integrated Campaign. Jamina carried the self-defence spray she always had on her, and the Taser. They made an effective team. Jamina would incapacitate the assailants with the spray, then he would smash them.

And then this other guy from her work... He seemed to be on their side...

"Which way are you headed?"

"Which way are *you* headed!"

"You seem to know where you off to. I need to get to Soweto, but..."

"We're going to Sandton."

“I’ll come with you. We don’t have to... But we can just... We need to be a gang.”

“Let’s go. Back to back with Jamina in the middle. I’ll lead, you fight the back. Jamina finishes them if they get through us. Then we swop. We take the back roads. Bryanston, Rivonia, Morningside, Sandton. Just smash everyone who comes at us. If they move with us, but not too close, we leave them for now. If we find a quiet spot, we rest. But we’ve got to be in before it gets dark. What’s your name?”

“Solomon. I’m Solomon. You?”

“Caleb. My name’s Caleb.”

“Soli and I work together,” said Jamina. “Or we used to...”

Already the old days were over. Now they had to fight their way home, sprinting, vaulting, vandalising. Avoiding the roads, they had clambered over the fence and stolen across the school sports fields, making precious metres that would have cost blood out on the streets. Already the electric fences were useless. They hung limp and flaccid, little more than a climbing aid as they scaled the walls of complexes and followed the boundary walls between the developments.

Jamina never faltered, though. She used the Taser and the spray, so that the ones who did approach soon backed off, weeping, till they smashed them to make sure, keeping formation all the while.

Following the roofs and walls worked for some several blocks, but they risked being cornered like cats up a tree. When someone in the mob spotted them and the crowd began forming, they had to backtrack, get down and find another route.

For a while they took the river - the bridges were death. Already the thugs were finding each other. Just as the two of them had found Solomon by instinct and circumstance, so other gangs were forming, united around something else besides a quest for safety.

Everyone believes theirs is a righteous violence, but there was no kindness in that particular violence. Its scent a black-eyed, primal, physical superiority. They would kill simply because they could, not because they had to.

He knew a route between the gated avenues. At some of them, the guards had banded together, at once a force, but also a target. For them the penny had not dropped yet.

North Street runs parallel to Rivonia Road, they worked out that they could get close to home before they would have to emerge into the main thoroughfare. But eventually, after several blocks, there it was now. The full, sick hell of it...

They saw cars rolled and burning. Corpses being ransacked where they had fallen, a man surrounded by a gang of thugs, holding them at bay only with his raised fists and the determination in his eyes.

“Just give it up,” they were saying. “Just give it up.”

Ten of them, twelve of them now. He caught Caleb’s eye, a desperate plea, but Caleb looked away. And in that moment, they pounced on him, screaming, shrieking with crazed excitement. They tore the clothes from his body and began devouring him like a pack of dogs.

It was their chance to sprint through, and to take the Adolf Street route that had once been a secret lovers’ stroll for Caleb and Jamina. Now it became their salvation. They could hear the screams from barely a block away. At the entrance to the street, a woman begged for her child’s life...

“Please don’t take him! Don’t take him! Take me!”

Again, they ignored the terror. But in their selfish desperation, they began grunting like bears, pulling themselves forward with all limbs, snarling, howling in the agony of exertion, chests burning pain. Drenched in fear, they dragged themselves beneath a yucca tree at the entrance to a complex on Adolf Street. They stank of sweat, urine and fear. Jamina had been keeping up, but now she was battling, holding her side where a man had grabbed her and not relented until kicked in the neck and stomped. His nails had drawn blood there.

She was unsteady on her feet and they needed all their hands free for fighting. They would have to take the shortest route for the final stretch to the complex.

Up the hill, across Grayston Drive, past the fire station and home.

It would be mayhem. The whole district of Sandton came together there. It was the road to the highway, the M1 north out of town. Out of town! Oh, could they one day dare to dream of that!

One day, but first they would fight the battle of Grayston Drive. The sick moan of metal was what announced it, as they ascended the hill, skirting the local bar, already in flames sky high. And through the smoke came the groan of those cars enmeshed, vehicles climbing over each other, fistfights, men wrestling on the roofs of these cars, already as the vehicles gave their last and the engines exploded, stuck fast, as the vultures descended for the pickings. The exhausted, terrified men killed with a blow, the women dragged out punched and raped on the spot. But the erupting hell provided enough distraction for Caleb to bludgeon a path across. On foot, they were indistinguishable from the pickers, the parasites, the vultures preying on the panicked car people. Like lions choosing their wildebeest, the scavengers had their pick of the commuters, now imprisoned by their very means of escape, prisoners of their mighty road machines. Jailed by their flight.

They smashed their way across and met Sabelo the robot boy, still at his post at the traffic lights on the corner of Linden Street and Grayston Drive. But now, in

place of a black plastic bin liner, he carried a flaming torch, a tree limb set ablaze in one of the dozen car fires that now scarred the intersection. And this was not yet the onramp to the highway. That lay a kilometre east.

Like a palace guard, Sabelo stood aside and ushered them past. Like primates, they crawled the pavement, the road still gridlocked, but these cars on the side road were eerily abandoned, steaming feebly and long stripped of meaning. Cars. Roads. Land. People.

From that day, meaning would be a luxury. One of the fondly recalled indulgences of peaceful times. Perhaps they might one day rebuild it, reinstall meaning as some kind of organising principle. But for now, the only currency was strength, power and violence.

They arrived at the gate to the terrified glares of their anonymous neighbours. Some desperate lengths of razor wire, hastily draped, they managed to move aside with their own bloody panic. Like supplicants, they lifted Jamina over the gate and saw her drop to safety, inside.

The Chinese neighbours, uncommunicative at the best of times, acknowledged them, and accepted her arrival, but made no attempt to assist them. Solomon hoisted him over. Caleb reached back to drag Solomon over after him, but no.

A gang of passing scavengers saw Caleb and Solomon clinging to the lip of the gate, the two of them locked in an intimate embrace, wrestling to crest that last

boundary to safety. They laughed as they hacked him down. A pitchfork was embedded in Solomon's spine and his body then tossed back into the street, like so much garden waste.

He seemed to subside into exhausted dissolution before anything else took him. But his body did convulse inward, into a clenched ball of pain and sorrow, as the thug prised the pitchfork free from his ribcage.

They hadn't even bothered to go through his pockets.

After that, the neighbours started to get to know each other...

"That Taser will run out of charge," said Leon. "We need something deadly, but scalable. Come to the yard."

Leon's yard already had the look of acceptance. Already now, on day one, it was a weapons workshop. The garden implements from the shed near the gatehouse had been moved here and now stood along the wall like it was a gun rack.

A fire from the remains of a small bookcase crackled under a cooking pot.

"I'm using the water from the swimming pool for cooking. But while we still have water, we must run a pot by the gatehouse and scald anybody who tries their luck. We might even be able to get fat from the corpses,

melt it and use it to chase them away. That might be more work than it's worth, though."

"And the lawnmower?"

"There's still some fuel in it. But if we can connect the car battery and get it to run off that, it'll make a weapon. Repel or attack."

"Who's in charge here," asked Caleb.

"I am, at the moment. But I'm old. We need to have a trustees' meeting."

Caleb had planned on being the absent trustee, the useless one. The fourth. The one who had only joined the committee because it was the path of least resistance, and because, after all, Leon, Bonga and Shanaaz would do all of the real work. Perhaps he would enjoy just enough influence to get the damp proofing done on his own unit.

Sadly, work had proved difficult to avoid, and being a trustee was a thankless task. Whether you were doing the admin work you had been enlisted to do, or studiously ignoring every email and WhatsApp, you remained a figurehead for everything that was wrong in the complex.

Still, Stylianos from number 12 would corner you by the gatehouse and quiz you for an hour about what the hell we were paying the managing agents for when they

were so useless. How he could rebuild the boundary wall for half the price in a quarter of the time with his own bare hands and that was why he had embarked on a one-person levy boycott. Despite his passion for the community, he unfortunately had better things to do than attend the annual general meeting at least once in the decade he had lived in the complex.

To the guards, you became a human symbol of the exploitation implicit in a monthly salary of nine thousand a month. Even if the complex weren't the ones paying that salary. As the only male on the trustees' committee who had not yet had a hip replacement, it had fallen to Caleb to engage the drug dealers in number 16 about screaming blue murder at the sky at 1am and how it was disturbing the couple with the new baby in 21. And how while it wasn't technically against complex rules for 17 different people to be buzzed in every day and then buzzed out two minutes later, it started becoming a threat to complex safety when there were more strangers in the place than recognisable residents.

He and his fellow corrupt exploiter trustees became the target of all grievances, the symbol of all that was wrong and immoral in the complex when the Great Special Levy of August, September, October and November was imposed. Especially when the reason given was something as nebulous as "unstable foundations".

It became his responsibility to write the sternly worded letters about infractions of the rules, “because what if one of the owners is unstable and they take badly to the news, and then come knocking on my door?” He had to write the one about the party in number 9, where they chanted struggle songs all night until 8am, at which point the reinforcements arrived and things segued into a deep-house party featuring a DJ Maphorisa career retrospective.

His was the thankless task of addressing the race war between Unit 1 and Unit 2, which seemed to be, at heart, about the burning of imphepho, dogs, talking too loud when on your balcony, how to raise the issue of noise with your neighbours, the phrase “you people”, the aroma of bone soup, the playing of the music of Theuns Jordaan within earshot of one’s neighbours and making generalising insights about groups to which one does not belong.

He had had to explain to the residents in a group email that “you may already have heard via the complex grapevine that we had an unfortunate shooting incident on Saturday afternoon. One of our residents was apparently followed back from the airport by a gang of robbers. Upon entering the complex, he was followed inside and held at gunpoint. Jackson, our security guard, was locked in the guard toilet with his daughter Robyn, who happened to be visiting, as it was Take a Girl Child To Work Day. Fortunately, neither of them was

seriously harmed, besides Jackson, who suffered a hip injury and Robyn, who was held by the throat and possibly molested. She is quite traumatised by the incident, as you can imagine. We ask that in future you check your rear-view mirror to ensure you are not being followed every time you enter the complex.”

Their unpopular polity held sway for a good five years, before he simply didn't show up for one year's AGM and was able to escape the draft. In the nebulous name of self-care, he again ignored all political complex correspondence and remained a free agent and citizen of the complex until the time when it happened.

He'd known the time would come, but he owed himself a hiatus from politics. And now that the call had arrived, he saw that this, this wasn't politics. This was about action.

But first, politics.

As peace-time chair, Leon convened a trustees meeting at the lapa to form a new subcommittee.

“I think we should call it a war cabinet,” he said.

“But we're not at war,” objected Jamina. “War is such a nationalist construct. You need to have a country to be at war. And an army. We have neither.”

“I was speaking metaphorically,” replied Leon. “It would be a war cabinet in the same way as a political party might have a war cabinet to fight a difficult election, or a company might assemble a war cabinet to handle crisis communications.”

“This is no time for metaphors,” she said. “People are being murdered on our freakin’ doorstep. We need an understanding of what is going on and a strategy to deal with it.”

“If it’s not war, then what is it that’s going on out there,” snapped Leon.

“Unrest.”

“Unrest! Unrest is people marching for better service delivery. For water and lights. This is flippin’ Armageddon! The state has collapsed. Whatever happened out there has brought down the entire system. We have no police, no internet, no phones, no cellphones...”

“No water and lights...” Jamina interjected.

“... uh, no water and lights, sure. But these guys at the gates, with the banging... They overran Fontenay the other night. I could see the flames from here. The whole place burnt to the ground. If this isn’t war... I don’t know what the politically correct name for it is, but we’ve got to defend ourselves.”

“Of course we do,” agreed Jamina for the first time. “But don’t call it war. It’s something far worse.”

At that first sign of agreement, Caleb felt it opportune to chip in.

“Whatever it’s called, we’re fighting for our lives. And we are all we have. The people in this complex are our family... our gang, our government, our army. Whatever you want to call it. We’re going to live or die by what we do. No one is coming to help us. The only people who come to this place are coming to take it over, to take everything, to kill us and to burn it down.”

“That’s pretty much it,” added Anne, the older Jewish lady who had held the flowers-and-gardening portfolio since the inception of the complex.

The complex gained its Romance nomenclature from the Italian developers who had ridden the Tuscan townhouse wave in the 1980s, buying up a riding school that had once been some kind of farm on the edge of Sandton and subdividing it. Their neighbouring developments retained the horse-riding theme – the Stables on the left and Equus on the right. But they had been granted the epithet La Colonia.

“That’s exactly it,” Anne continued. “People don’t have anything to lose, and they need to stay alive. They looted the shops long ago. There isn’t a farm within 20 kays of here. There’s no food. The last bits of food are probably what we have here in our homes. They’re coming for us because they need to survive.”

“We need to look at that,” said Leon. “Our food is also going to run out. Then what? We can’t just sit here living off scraps. We need to plan for that...”

“But first we need to defend ourselves,” said Caleb. “We need to make sure we’re secure. Then we can build from there. What weapons do we have to defend ourselves with?”

“Just the gardening... the gardening implements,” said Leon. “Pick, hammer, some saws, bolt cutter, panga...”

“I have a small chainsaw in my unit,” added Anne. “It runs off petrol, so it could be used.”

“And for the barricades?” Have we got enough of the heavy gear piled up against the gates? The cars, the furniture?”

“I’m worried about the furniture,” moaned Leon, in the same tone he’d used when the tree bordering unit 6 cracked the wall and the resident refused to let them chop it down because she was an environmentalist – if only a tenant, and not an owner.

“I’m worried about stacking all the furniture up there. If it catches fire, this whole place is gonna go up. I think we should use rubble. We can dig up the paving tiles and use them to build a wall. We need to seal ourselves off. We don’t need that gate to open again.”

“We will need it one day...” said Jamina. “We can’t just hold ourselves captive and wait to die.”

“We’re all going to die anyway,” Leon mused. “It’s just a matter of time.”

Caleb was more concerned about logistics.

“How do you propose we build this wall?”

“We have the pavers, and a bit of cement left over from the damp proofing. There’s still water in the swimming pool and we can dig up some sand from somebody’s garden...”

“Not the gardens. There’s no need to start digging up people’s gardens,” said Anne. “We need a bit of quality of life, to make it worth...”

“Jesus, Anne,” Leon exploded, “If we can’t protect our borders, our perimeter, we’re not going to be alive long enough to enjoy any quality of life!”

“I’m more worried about the water,” said Jamina. “That swimming pool is the only water we have. You really want to use it to make cement? We need it for cooking and food. We can’t waste water on building a wall.”

“For god’s sake,” came Leon again. “How many times must I say this? We need to stay alive. That means protecting ourselves. You know that hierarchy of needs? That thing, the pyramid or whatever?”

“Maslow’s hierarchy of needs?” Jamina responded, in the way of someone who has intimate knowledge of her subject, and is accustomed to being underestimated. “I am familiar with the concept.”

“Ja, Mango’s hierarchy. The first, most important need is safety and security. That has to be our priority. If we can’t keep ourselves safe, then we can’t even think about the next stage. If you can’t keep your children safe from being stolen away, then it doesn’t matter whether you can feed them or not...”

There was a moment, a beat.

“How many children are in the complex?”

“I think we have four. There are two babies. The Indian lady in number 20, your little one and then, then... they say there might be a girl staying with Denver. I’m not sure...”

“Denver? Don’t tell me he’s still living here? I thought we got rid of him...”

“The sheriff was supposed to come last month to evict him, but then, then everything changed.”

“We should get him involved,” said Jamina. “I know he’s... difficult, but we might need him.”

“Never! Denver? He’s a gangster, that one.”

“He’s also dealing drugs, I’m sure.”

“They have fights there all the time. Have you heard them?”

“We *need* fighting people now!”

“But what if he starts fighting with us?”

“I just don’t trust him.”

“I’m scared of him...”

“Rather have him *in* the tent than *out* the tent...”

“What tent?”

“I tell you what... Caleb, don't you want to approach him?”

It was ever thus.

Denver was a nasty piece of work. He had been dealing drugs since his arrival in the complex. Probably coke or speed or tik. Something chemical. The clients looked like they were here to obtain something of that type.

The clients would park at the gate, hooting, demanding their purchase, until eventually Denver came jogging out, briefly leaned into the driver's window and then strolled back into the complex.

At other times, there would be screaming matches over the phone, Denver standing in the middle of the entrance road threatening someone's life.

“Listen here! Listen here! Don't misunderstand! I will take your heart from your body. I will cut you! ... I don't care. ... Shuttup! Shuttup! Where are you? Come here! I want you here and I want the full amount...”

He also seemed to indulge in his own supply, especially on Friday nights, which bled through into Saturday mornings.

Then the screamed phone conversations seemed to be about wholesale, more than retail. The tone more diplomatic.

“Ja, ja. Where you now? But it's been 45 minutes... I know, I know. I just... okay, okay, okay. Just come when

you finished there. ... Ja, no. I've got it all here. Ja, the full... No, I promise you ... And that money. I've got all of it. I promise you. Just as soon as you can..."

They had found proof hard to come by, and neither the security company nor the police showed any interest in investigating the case. The only time those institutions had really become interested was when they had mentioned the children.

Once, during a particularly horrific 2am screaming episode, Bonga from number 9, which overlooked Denver's unit, had cast a glance into the yard.

There he had caught the usual sight of Denver topless in his shorts, howling into his handset.

"I will cut you! Do you hear me? You will die begging for your life! You fu-u-u-u-u-."

At that point, a girl, perhaps 12 years old, naked, had emerged from the house. Bonga said her hair looked like she hadn't bathed in weeks. She looked scared. And not a stitch of clothing on. Bonga said you expect to see little kids naked every now and then, if they're three or four years old, but this girl was almost a teenager.

When she came out, Denver had sensed it immediately. He held his handset to his chest, spun around wildly and ordered her in a tense, urgent voice, "Get the hell back inside!"

The girl had flinched, like she expected a blow, and scurried back inside.

When they mentioned children, the police had become somewhat interested. There was talk of sending a social worker around, but Caleb had been away at work when they had come to visit, so he had not kept track of what had happened.

Surely they would have sent someone?

Perhaps not, and now there was no more they. Whoever had been staying in that flat with Denver was still inside there. Since it happened, two weeks ago? Three? Denver hadn't been seen since it happened.

The rest of the residents could be spotted daily, huddled in various corners of the driveway, murmuring to each other, eyeing the gate, listening with half an ear for the return of the gangs and comparing imagined notes from the streets that they had not been able to access since it happened.

"They say we're the last complex in Sandton that hasn't been taken over."

"They say they have water over at Atholl Gardens."

"They say there's already cholera in Pretoria."

"They say a woman was raped yesterday. They say she panicked and tried to make it to the highway, and they got her by the park."

"They say you can still get petrol in Alex."

"They say if you leave your cellphone battery out in the sun for a day, you'll have charge. They say if you stand on the roof you can get one bar of reception."

The fabricated, received wisdom they shared was pure speculation, but it filled a human need. They had to compare notes, they had to speak, even though they had nothing to share. There was no news coming in, no interaction, no outside contact. Essentially, there was no outside.

All there was, was complex gossip. And even that had not implied that there were people in unit 16, and they never came out. Did that mean there were no people in Unit 16? Did that mean that people knew, but were not prepared to share it? Too afraid. Was Unit 16 simply beyond public gossip? Too risky to share?

Do we rather gossip about our friends than about strangers? Is news only relevant when we share some commonality? Is gossip a form of bonding, claiming, of identifying with the subject, of holding them to our bosom and saying, "Shame, she is only human, just like us"?

Is it othering? Does gossip build a wall between us and them? Are we saying, "we are not like that"?

Is it simply armour, some way of bringing people down to the level of familiarity, of demystifying the mysterious beings we share the world with? Why do we feel compelled to discuss our fellow travellers?

Whatever our reasons, the happenings in Unit 16 did not fall within that ambit. Denver, his cohabitants and their activities had remained barely discussed ever since it happened.

Before it happened, before things changed, then Denver was the flavour of the day. In those days, they couldn't get enough of him. Denver was the unhinged lunatic drug merchant of La Colonia. The poison of society, corrupting, toxifying. He had children in there. Something should be done. We should call child welfare. We should get hold of the authorities.

But now that there were no authorities, when social development was a fantasy, more than a national competency. Now, all of a sudden, it was terrifying to talk about. Because if we did, we would have to admit that no longer did something need to be done by someone else – some reassuring state arm of security out there, which despite its shortcomings, at least did exist. No, no one was going to do anything about Unit 16.

If we spoke the words and acknowledged that Unit 16 was a problem, then we – and we alone – would have to do something about it. Fail to do that, and Unit 16 wins. It has poisoned us already, because we have acknowledged that Unit 16 is a problem and we do nothing about it. Does that make us the same as Unit 16, or does it mean that here at La Colonia, people can do what they like? We have no rule of law. Not only have things fallen apart out there in the outside world, but they are completely out of control in here too, here in our only sanctuary.

And so, when Anne spoke Denver's name, a spell was broken. We acknowledged him, and we brought him

back to life in our understanding of ourselves. From there, the trustees owned him and resolved to bring him out.

Whatever he was, we would go and see about Denver. It would teach us something about ourselves.

He was the evil within us. We would know him, and then we would know whether he was the kind of evil that could be useful to us, us here in this time of so much evil. Or was he the kind of evil that must be cast out? Was our only hope, when surrounded by fear and hatred and primal predation... was it to stay pure? Must we retain a state of pristine holiness in this world of iniquity in order to survive, or is evil the weapon of these times? Must we debase ourselves and embrace evil in order to fight it?

And having done so, can we ever shed ourselves of it? Can the depravity required to fight a war ever be shed? Does war infect and destroy immediately, the moment it is acknowledged, regardless of the eventual outcome?

Can we say, you have fought a war? You are warlike, and thus evil?

Or must we say, you have ventured into the cave of darkness, you have fought the dragon and you have emerged back into the light. We thank you for the fear-sacrifice you have made in the name of love?

Unit 16 was that cave of darkness. Perhaps it was a cancer contracted from outside, growing within.

Perhaps it was the lair of a potential ally, who might be convinced to emerge and fight the fight with them. To fight for safety, sustenance, perhaps perchance to one day break for freedom.

Unit 16 was the home of hopelessness, depravity and fear. No one had ever gone in there. None of the trustees. Glancing over the wall, you might spot a row of empty Black Label quarts. You might hear screams, catch a glimpse of a terrified, captive child, but no one have ever gone inside there.

No one. But since he'd committed his first killings, Caleb had gained confidence.

Caleb knocked with the back of his middle knuckle. Three swift raps.

No response.

He knocked again.

Still nothing.

"Hallo?"

He tried the handle. It seemed locked, but he knew the mechanism in these doors. Sometimes they are unlocked and if you push it the door will open. This one did just that.

"Hallo?"

There was an echo. He eased the door open and peered in.

The room had a musty scent, like a sealed bedroom after a big night. And it was dark, at 4 in the afternoon.

The only furniture in the lounge room was a couch. The dark-brown kind from House & Home that consists of three linked La-Z-Boys in a row. A sheet lay across the couch. There were probably 12 Black Label quart bottles in the room. Some empty, some half drunk. There was no artwork on the walls. In place of curtains, grass mats covered the windows, nailed into position against the walls. The kitchen sink was a scrapheap of abandoned aluminium cooking pots. Four large cereal boxes were visible in the overflowing rubbish bin. Rice Krispies, Corn Flakes, two Milo.

“Hallo?” he tried one more enquiry. “Denver?”

From behind the couch, a groan.

“Huh?”

“Denver? It’s Caleb from Number 2. Is that you?”

Denver’s eyes appeared over the back of the couch as he sat up, apparently having been awoken on the floor.

“You awake?”

He rubbed a hand across his face.

“Who are you?”

“I’m Caleb from Number 2. Are you awake?”

“What you want? What you doing in my house?”

“The door was unlocked, I came in to look for you. No one has seen you for weeks. I just want to check if... If you know what’s happened.”

“What you mean? What happened?”

“Everything’s turned off. No power, no cellphones, no water. Gangs on the streets. We need help. They going to come to the gate.”

“Who’s gonna come?”

“I don’t know. The gangs. They break in, take everything, take people, kill people. Burn the place.”

“They must come try.”

And with that, he lay back down on the floor of the lounge. Visible around the side of the last La-Z-Boy was his foot. A tradesman’s boot, for a plumber or an electrician.

“Fuck off out my house.”

“Are you the only one in here?”

“Ja, it’s just me. Now fuck off.”

He did not rise from his prone position. But he howled a final blast of fury, pure hate.

“Out!”

“Okay, okay. I’m going to go. But if you need anything... If you want to join us, we meeting every afternoon at the lapa to discuss what to do...”

No response.

Caleb turned to the door, but out of the corner of his eye he saw a smudge, in the back of the furthest room, he spotted something. Through the ajar door of the second bedroom, he saw a dressing mirror. The mirror reflected the opposite corner of that room, by the cupboard. And in that corner, in the darkened corner, wrapped in a sheet, a human form, a trembling lump of

laundry, it might be, but coming at him like light beams from the darkness, just visible above the sheet, a set of eyes. A child's eyes.

For a second, perhaps two seconds their eyes met, before Denver felt the connection.

"You still here? I said fuck off!"

"Okay. So... maybe we'll see you at the lapa one of these days. Like they say... All are welcome."

He risked one last glance into the back room, and still eyes were there, staring holes into him, begging, beseeching, "Help me!"

They could not be misunderstood.

They had established a watch roster. Three shifts a day. Five residents a shift, with everybody on standby to come to fight at a ring of the bell. Leon had donated a ship's bell from his bar to serve as an alarm. The watch leader would carry it with them as they patrolled the perimeter. The watch was to be based at the gatehouse, making patrols every hour. Each resident bordering the perimeter was also responsible for monitoring their stretch of wall and enjoined to raise the alarm if anything occurred there.

As for what that alarm would comprise, every resident had a unique method. Anne had dug out an old rape whistle, Bonga a vuvuzela and Jamina two pans. Caleb tried to calibrate his mind to listen out for the

entire suite of possible attack alarms in an environment where sounds of violence were now almost standard fare.

A scream, for instance, was nothing alarming, as long as it emanated from outside the complex. A bang? A smash? A shatter? What even constitutes an alarming sound, when panic is the very fabric of daily existence?

How do you even begin to insist that your panic is somehow more urgent than all the others? The risk was no longer that one person might cry wolf. Now the wolf was at large. There was a wolf. The wolf was utter, unalloyed self-interest. And no one needed to alert others to it.

It became clear to Caleb that theirs was an island of community in a sea of selfishness, greed and grasping desperation. And even here on the island, he could sense the selfishness taking root. They were as likely to be invaded from within as without. And when they were, for he now realised they would be, who knew what that would look like...

Invasion from the borders could only look one way. Determined assailants scaling the walls, eliminating risks and exploiting opportunities.

He flinched as the truth struck home. He had been using the metaphors of war for years, in his corporate reporting, his written attempts to stir emotion in his imagined, if not imaginary audience. He remembered how those words had begun to lose power years ago

already, as the experience of real violence became more likely.

Could the language of violence ever trump actual violence? Could you expect a woman to feel affected by your bold, competitor-report assertion that, “the war to protect our market will require aggressive messaging and quick anticipation of opposition tactics”, when she has been aggressively mugged in hand-to-hand combat, and sexually molested, if not raped for her smartphone the weekend before?

He wondered briefly whether aggressive metaphors became more common during times of great violence. Or did they become rarer, as their putative users realised how puny their words were, as lived hyperbole well and truly touched down on their planet?

Perhaps language became a shelter in times of horror. He remembered student uprisings, the service-delivery protests, the mine massacres, and their messaging. Their language was earnest, intense, often riven with dogma, but always formal and direct. Accuracy became more visceral and precise.

“When protestors sought refuge in the church, police shot the priest in the face.”

The event that this described was hellish. But the language used was impersonal. War reporting can be clinical. Some writers embrace the surreal madness of war and do it justice through psychedelic inner

journeys. Letters from the battlefield are masterpieces of understatement, euphemism and reassurance.

“We had a contact outside Lichtenburg. Tried to stop them, but grooms made off with our horses. Missing you and Pickle. At field hospital. Hope to be home by Christmas.”

These words accept that they can never express the feeling of fighting for your life when you have no real idea why you're doing it. And they do not attempt to. They are the language of minimising, a spell to conquer the fear, the hate, the horror and to put it in a word box. That thing that happened, it will be called “a contact”.

What would they call this in the future, he wondered? If there ever was a future of some continuity with their present, what would they call this thing that happened?

Language has moods, abilities, shortcomings, aspirations, it grows over time and it learns, adapts, adopts... it is becoming. Language, like people, has agency. Language does what it wants to do.

It also has limitations, try as it might. Some things it cannot do justice, sometimes only the greatest wordsmiths have the facility to use language to really express true horror.

Sometimes language stands helpless and merely relays information. Like a watch patrol guard finding a solitary scout in the garden of number 16, armed with a knife, but unable to get past the Trellidor.

Bhwweeeeeeeet!

On the rape whistle.

Hweeeeeeeeeeeet!

Hweeeeeeeeeeeet!

Against the thrumming chant of the gang on the other side of the wall, whatever they were chanting. Again, the words hardly mattered. Here they relayed feeling.

The feeling was, we are coming to kill you. Its real purpose was to ensure the users of that language felt, understood and expressed that feeling.

The rape whistle shrieked. The gang chant. There was a banging of pots. The sound of glass cracking, splintering to the ground... and then a hacking. A woman's scream.

And the constant clink of metal against metal.

Ting!

Ting!

Ting!

Ting!

Ting!

Ting!

Ting!

Ting!

Caleb was off watch when the call came.

“They’re breaking into Anne’s flat!”

He still had to pull the bed back from the door. As the heaviest movable item in his flat, it had been used to barricade their door, while he slept on the lounge carpet, holding Jamina to him like his only possession, his only sanity in the madness. All the while he was twitching like a coiled spring, slipped slightly out of its bracket.

“Who’s there?”

“It’s me, Bonga! Er... Colonia 9”

“Are they really inside the complex?”

“Come, we need you!”

He confirmed that she could barricade the door behind him, and then left the apartment. The wheel spanner had been by his side throughout his pitiful, pointless sleep. He had not removed his clothing since the day it happened. What for? To bathe? To look good? To impress with his sense of style? To somehow not smell of fear?

Outside, he listened for the sounds of Jamina replacing the barricades. He steadied himself against the door and waited for the dizziness to abate, and then followed Bonga towards the scene of the action.

Neither he nor Jamina carried any keys. A locked door became a liability when you were trapped, by fire, by panic, by gangs of killers or all three. He had seen as much from the balcony of number 13, looking over into the Stables next door, when the gangs had that guy’s

unit surrounded and used the fuel from his own cooking fire, the legs of his own lounge table, to smash in the panes and then set fire to the curtains. They then stood ready to club him when he emerged, but he never did. Caleb guessed the guy must have locked himself in. Even if you're surrounded, when you're burning alive, you'd expect a person to take their chances and leave the house. But he did not.

There was a moment when one of the windows was smashed out from the inside. The man's face emerged, wreathed in smoke, gasping, begging, vomiting.

"Please, please, please, please!"

That was all he said, as the black smoke erupted out around him. They watched him burn alive, sobbing like a child, begging for mercy, like a child hoping its pathetic sobs would elicit mercy from its mother.

He slashed his neck on the pane towards the end, and his screams went into falsetto. His face was purple, and seemed to solidify in the final moments, its death mask set into smoked meat. There was an instant where you realised, this is not a person, even though the eyes bulged, the tongue lunged out, the fluids still flowed...

So they carried no keys now, they just used the barricades.

Caleb strode across the driveway towards Anne's unit, where her rape whistle had managed to make itself noticed.

Bonga carried a kinked grass-cutting panga. It whistled as he lashed the air in front of them, feeling the range of the weapon.

They avoided the door, simply peering over the wall and realising the battle had begun. The gangs were inside the complex.

The internal walls were barely head-high to a man. Caleb was able to pull himself over in a second. Bonga followed suit. They touched down on the lawn and started swinging. Some kind of watchman was keeping an eye, but he was easily dispatched with a spanner to the head and a satisfying thungggggg.

Inside, men had Anne over the back of the couch. They were taking her while others hacked pieces of flesh out of her back. It was a grim, silent ritual, punctuated only by grunts and sobs. Bonga decapitated one at a stroke, and got his panga wedged in the neck of the second. As the man fell, Bonga placed his boot on his neck and prised the tool loose. It ventilated a spray of jugular blood that continued in diminishing blasts against the wall as the man gave his last kicks. The others were preoccupied violating Anne. The one got the flat end of the spanner in his eye socket and the other had his skull split vertically from behind. He died immediately, still inside his last victim.

They pulled the corpse off Anne. She lay face down. They turned her over.

Anne curled. Her limbs folded into themselves. Her knees came up to her chest. Her eyes closed and her breathing lost its rhythm. It seemed she was unable to breathe involuntarily. She was forcing it, through some combination of sobs, gasps and chuckles. Two breaths in. Two breaths out. In. Out. In. In. Out. Out. Out. In. A gasp.

They enveloped her like a child, wrapped her in a couch throw, then they held her, Bonga and Caleb, while she sobbed her agony into herself.

“There we go. There we go. Let it all out. There we go.”

Another one vaulted the wall behind them. Bonga jumped up to go see, but it was Leon. He understood in a second.

“Is she...”

Caleb nodded. She was. Caleb held her body, and Leon caressed her cheek. The convulsions became less frequent, but more violent.

“Anne? It’s Leon. Can you hear me? It’s me Leon... We love you, my girl... Can you hear me? It’s... It’s okay... I’m here now. Leon’s here... It’s okay. It’s okay... Can you hear me, my Annie? Okay, my girl... Okay... It’s okay now, you hear me? It’s okay, my Anne. Leon loves you, but it’s okay. You can just... just ... don’t worry, my girl... Leon is here with you... everybody loves you, my girly. My lovely girl... Leon’s lovely Annie girl... Don’t worry my girl... It’s okay. Okay, my Annie. Leon’s here... remember Leon, my Annie? You remember old Leon...”

Remember me, my girl? ... Oh, my good strong, brave Annie. Oh, what a good girl... It's okay... don't worry. It's okay, my girl. Just let go... It's okay now. You can just... There you go, my Annie. There you go... Don't ... don't ... it's okay... there you go. It's okay, my girl... There we go, my good girl... There we go... there we go... there we go... shhhh.... shhhh ... shhhh ... shhhh."

Like he was putting a child to sleep, Leon let Anne know it was okay to let go. He sent her on her way. Caleb was pinned beneath her throughout, with Leon lying across the two of them, so it was a bloody, tangled heap of bodies, shaken every once in a while by a convulsion from Annie's body. They gradually became less frequent, as Leon spoke the calm into her, and gradually her spirit left. Bonga stood watch and they lay in a pile and sent Anne on her way. The jugular blood pooled in the garden entrance to the flat and the morning sun began seeping into the room. Only then did Leon let his feelings go.

A sound appeared. Like the rhythm of the gangs, it seemed to come from everywhere. It resonated with the surroundings. It was on the frequency of existence, but it was coming out of Leon. It was his deepest sorrow. His tormented grief finally coming out, now that his friend, his age mate, his contemporary, had left and he need no longer be strong. Caleb had no understanding of their relationship. He had felt the life force leave the

body on top of him. It obtained a heaviness that was beyond weight. At the same time, almost the same instant, Leon's strength left him, and he surrendered to the grief. Surrounded by corpses, they sobbed. They cried for their lost comrade, they cried for their lost lives, for their hopeless world. The nation that had once bound them together with the very adversaries that now lay dead around them. They cried for their own lives, now so desperate, so basic, so elemental. They cried for art, that great lost language, and for language itself, now almost unnecessary. They lay naked before each other and cried for life. For had they not already lost it? Were they not all already dead, even those of them with their hearts still beating, their stomachs still churning bile, their bowels still grinding out shit? Was that life? Was living to live, even?

When he had gathered strength again, Leon pulled himself upright, and they carried Anne into the yard, placed her on her couch astride her fire pit and burned her body there in her garden. Hers was the only garden still worthy of the name in the whole of La Colonia. Or the entire city, for all they knew.

As the couch caught and the flames began licking at the sheet around her, Leon hacked at the rose bushes and assembled a bunch of flowers, which he bound with a strip torn from the upholstery.

Tenderly, he reached into the flames and placed the spray in the crook of her neck, still folded in. Anne was buried in a foetal ball, as she had been delivered.

Then the couch took and the flames wrapped her up. They stood and kept the blaze healthy until the body fat began to sizzle and the skull popped. Then they threw more kindling on and again stood watch. They made sure to stay until there was no body left to recognise

By afternoon it was ash and bones. They stomped it into the ground and kicked the remains around the garden, spreading it out. Let the birds take her if they wanted her. Then they left. It was time for a trustees' meeting.

"You have to take over," said Leon. "I've got nothing left."

"But you do," said Caleb.

"Of course you do," agreed Bonga. "You helped Annie today. We would have had no idea what to do without you. You were strong today. It was us who were weak. We just did the hacking, the easy stuff. You administered the sacrament. That takes strength."

"But... What it takes out of you. I don't even know what to do with myself now. I don't know what the point is any more. Why are we even still here? What are we fighting for?"

"We're fighting for meaning. For community. For love," said Caleb. "We're fighting for a gentle spirit that

nurtures and grows and develops and doesn't just steal, and take and destroy."

"Are we really?" asked Leon, all sarcasm for the moment. "Are we really that great? Are we really better than the gangs... better than the gangs out there? Are we nurturing and growing things when we hack them in the neck with our pangas? Are we nurturing when we burn our friends' corpses like meat?"

"We are doing what we need to do to survive," said Caleb, understanding suddenly. "We are protecting our dream of a better life, and we will fight to the death to defend it. And one day, one day when we have the strength and the skill, and the knowledge, and the bravery and the numbers, we will find a way to grow that dream. For now, as you explained to us, we are at war."

"We are," Jamina decided. "Whatever else we call it is just stupid. It's war. We are fighting to protect our values."

"Are you sure that's not exactly what they are telling each other out there?" asked Leon. "Isn't that their same rhyme every evening when they come to raid another complex? Fighting for their values. It's the same! Kill or be killed."

"But they are attacking," said Bonga. "We are defending. If they didn't attack us, we would leave them alone. We only kill because we have to."

“Oh, yeah,” said Leon. “What happens when we run out of food, when we finish the last of the cans from my attic? What then? Are you quite sure we won’t start forming bands and going out onto the streets raiding for food and warm things and whatever else we come across?”

“But you’re right. We’re going to have to start doing that,” said Caleb. “We need to go raiding. And we need to do it now, while we still have some strength. Our food gives us power. If we just sit here finishing our supplies and waiting for them to come to us, we’ll be sitting ducks. We need to form a scouting party. Go out. Maybe there are more like us. We can’t be the only ones.”

Caleb had assumed power.

The point was underscored when Leon messed down the leg of his trousers during the trustees meeting.

“You see? it’s right like that,” agreed Leon. “You can say what you like about there being a lot of life in the old dog yet, but look at me. I can’t even keep from shitting myself.”

“You need some...” said Jamina, before tailing off when she realised what she was saying. “You need some Imodium.”

“We can get you some” said Caleb. “The chemist is just down the road. It’s less than a kilometre away. We

can make it. It'll be trashed, but there might still be medicine there. That's why we need to form a raiding gang. That can be our first outing. It will be a good way to test the waters. We can be out and back within 20 minutes. Let's plan it. I've had enough of cowering inside the complex waiting to be killed. Let's do it. And Leon, you're coming with us."

Caleb's sunny positivity sheltered a pressing need for the complex. Jamina was right, they took the availability of medicines for granted. But those were the old ways. In fact, they were exposed.

Living off the fast dwindling swimming-pool water had given them all diarrhoea. The scent of faeces clung to all of them. They had sworn to use only rain, cistern and geyser water for drinking, and pool water for cooking. But all the water was contaminated, and they were all getting sick.

What was an inconvenience before, had become life-threatening since it happened. Mrs Mohamed in number 17 got the runs and was dead within a day. Her face went red, she began coughing and she was found beside the pool in the afternoon unconscious. Cholera, bilharzia, diarrhoea... no one knew or cared what the name of the condition was, but they were certain there would be more deaths. The child from Unit 19 was no longer seen. He may also have succumbed.

Everyone was facing these issues, and it was delusional to pretend that the chemist would be an easy

score. Every person in the city was walking around covered in their own excrement, and every one of them knew the solution lay at the pharmacy. Caleb knew this too, but he was more about setting a goal, creating some purpose that would help them form their first gang. Something they could align towards. This hiding and waiting like sitting ducks was going to be the death of them. Attack was the best form of survival.

He also needed to keep Leon's mind on something. When Leon lost motivation, they would lose a leader. A leaderless crew is dangerous. It starts turning on itself. He had seen the same thing at the office, when the last manager left and they appointed that useless Gerald. The bitchiness got out of hand, business focus fell away and pretty soon they were laying people off.

Here, internal battles would see them all raped and bludgeoned to death. They needed a goal, and for now it was the Grayston Family Chemist on the main road. If they could get there in the early morning, he felt they might have a chance. The gangs tended to sleep late. Their rival gangs.

Four sounded like a good team complement. A diamond shape to cover left, right, front and rear. Quick and nimble, they could maintain a tight formation and progress at a fair clip. If they kept focus, they needn't even stop for long. In between the percussion and the attacks, the atmosphere itself provided cover.

It seemed the city had consolidated into settlements, the mayhem on the streets had subsided, or those unlucky enough to be out and alone had all been killed. The groups had now established their territory and were only venturing out on raids when necessary. He sensed a greater purpose across the city. Despite the madness, there was some kind of method to it, at least in the minds of the protagonists.

But it was a time for raiding, pure and simple, the same ancient tactic of warriors since settlements first arose. Band together for protection and to take from your neighbours. Fight to the death, and to the winner the spoils.

This was what they had always been, the people of the earth, as they played out their brief cameos on the crust of the planet, convincing themselves they could somehow *own* a piece of the earth. That they could place themselves and their objects across it and call it property.

The tenuous grip they had on even this tiny scrap of land could no longer be called ownership, although they sometimes tried to convince themselves this was the case.

“Our land,” they would say. “We’ve got to protect our land.”

“Our complex” made more sense, since that applied to the temporary buildings and fixtures that had been erected, bought and acquired. But the land, the land

abides. The land will remain. Its belonging, its ownership, will be only illusory, and that will go to those who want it most.

That was why he desperately needed to create some purpose, some reason for them to hang on to the land. Without that, they were lost. Without a myth to hang on to, there was no passion, and without passion, there could be no unity. And without unity, there would be no strength of purpose and only defeat.

For now, that myth was the need for medicine to keep themselves healthy and to ensure the survival of the complex. But that would only suffice for today. Tomorrow they would need another motivation, another reason to live. When there was no future, one had to reinvent it daily.

They decided that rather than dismantle the gate barricade, they would launch themselves into the street from the thatch roof of the pool lapa. From the apex of the roof, they had a clear view of the street. Then, if they slid off there quickly, they could hit the ground running.

Caleb dropped down first, managed to soften his fall and recover. Then he was able to assist Leon, Jamina and Bonga as they slid over. Wordlessly, they broke into a rhythmic jog, eating up the kilometre to the chemist.

The first grey gloaming of the morning had begun to soften the darkness. The streets seemed deserted, but the team maintained a lookout and kept the diamond intact. They found themselves slipping into a two-beat rhythm that made the exertion minimal. The rhythm pulled them, as it had in his former road-running days, when they would form a bus to somehow conquer the marathon as a team, to run at target pace, to motivate, to reassure, to protect. He remembered how staying on the bus had been the key to finishing the race. Survive as a group or die alone.

Again with the war metaphors.

Again the warlike language of peace time.

The crossroads where the battle of the first day had taken place was still choked with cars. But there was a certain peace about it. The bodies had been removed for burning, or eating. The fires were out, or dormant. The fires, the fires were now campfires! There were fires at every vehicle. The cars were homes. The dozens of tangled wrecks were being lived in! Now, as their rhythmic arrival disrupted the morning quiet, the inhabitants sprung to life. For once, he heard one of them speak. Intelligible words...

“Runners!”

“Runners!”

“Runners!”

“Runners!”

That was what they were, then. No gang, no assault troupe, no high-flown attack battalion. They were people running, and to the survivors they were prey!

But they were fast. The gang watchman had spotted them, but by the time he had alerted his comrades, they had already turned past them into the main road. The chemist was in sight up ahead. Now, to stick to the pavement, or to chance the road? They would have to cross. He led them into the street, where he saw a narrow path between wrecks. As they ran, he sensed a mob coalescing. He slowed and allowed the others to bunch into him. Survive as a group, or die alone.

“Weapons,” he murmured, and held his close. They would need time inside the drugstore. They didn’t want to alert the entire neighbourhood, then get themselves surrounded and holed up in the chemist. But that was now seeming inevitable. He made a snap decision.

“I’m going on ahead” he told Jamina. “Meet me there.” And he broke into a sprint.

They were moving too slowly, their every step already alerting the gangs ahead of them. The street was coming alive, now writhing with confused sufferers. Soon they would all understand.

It also now seemed impossible that the store would have anything salvageable inside it, surrounded as it was. Clearly the street people clung to the shopping centre as an icon. It was the church steeple that bound its district together. These were the desperate sufferers

of the Grayston Centre. And their sortie had come charging into their midst.

But Caleb was ahead of everybody. Alone, he was silent, he woke no one. No watchman announced his arrival. He was able to vault the snapped remnant of the boom gate at the entrance to the shopping centre. The chemist was on his immediate right. He grabbed the railing and pulled himself up the stairs to the entrance of the pharmacy.

It was barricaded shut.

Still with momentum, he hurled himself against the stockade of shopping trolleys. They collapsed into a chaotic wreck of wheels, wire and metal. He sprawled into the darkened store and immediately felt bodies underfoot. Whether they lived or not, he would soon find out.

He knew the store layout well, and he noticed that the racks had all been overturned. He ran his hand along the shelves, unable to make out what remained. But he felt the brittle crunch of cheap plastic and knew, there was still something there!

The back was where the hard drugs were, but the shelves had some useful stuff, and judging by the bodies, he might not have much time in there.

Caleb removed the bag he had brought along for the purpose and scraped everything he could feel into it. Boxes, litter, packaging, damp substances that could really be anything, including vomit... it all went in. With

luck, there would be something useful amongst it all. He gave himself a minute inside the store, and that was already taking risks. It was like a life-and-death trolley dash.

Sure enough, the bodies were alive. One of them stood up before he seemed to understand what he was trying to do, and Caleb charged headlong into his face, en route to the exit. No time for calculation. Run through the hurdles.

He emerged into a murderous mob.

The first blow caught him in the nose before he'd even left the store. He was hurdling a shopping trolley when he felt the punch. As he touched down, he immediately began swinging wildly and randomly, catching one woman in the throat with enough timing to knock her back. He was swinging again before he had time to see her land. He felt hands at his throat, but too many were fighting to get at him. The throng itself was his best defence.

He was beaten to the floor within seconds, but then just as quickly ripped to his feet. Few could get close enough to do real damage, but he was a ragdoll, ripped this way and that, tripped, kicked, again pulled erect, nails clawing at his face... He surrendered to the mob. If it was over, let them peck him to pieces.

The mob mind could not make its decision. He was to die, but quite *how* was yet to be seen. Grabbing and

pulling conquered pushing and beating, ultimately, and he felt himself dragged.

Then there was fire.

He would be burned alive.

But a fire requires a fireplace, and in the mob, there was a splash of fuel, a spark, a flame, but with no clearing, there was no space to focus the flames and the ventilation. The fire licked onto whichever scraps of fabric it could find, and spread...

Now the entire mob was aflame.

The raw desperation of being burned ripped through them. Caleb felt it at his face, but of this was to be his death dance. He had no preferences.

Now the fire drove the mob apart. The same anger that had focused the energy now blasted everyone asunder. Perhaps the petrol bomb had exploded.

There were no distinguishing features. All were filthy, opportunistic carnivores in hoodies, grey in colour, now fleeing in cowardice from the blaze.

Stumbling wildly, he realised with his last clear thought that if he remained upright, he would seem but another member of the rabid mob. He fled the blaze like the rest of them, and soon he was away from the epicentre. And Jamina at his elbow.

“Come. Keep going.”

They ran like terrified dogs from a flames. He dared not process his injuries yet. The fallen would become

the target, as always. So he ran, on a leg that felt damaged, through eyes that refused to focus.

But still. He clutched his spoils to his chest, somehow still stuffed beneath his hoodie. Let them not go the way they had come. Crazy desperate now. Staggering. Gasping. Weaving through that backstreet, but now plunging into the stream. Some respite, but the shouts. There was someone on their tail.

“Hey!”

“Hey!”

“Hey! Hey!”

“Hey! Hey! Hey! Hey!”

He slipped face-first into the water. Some weir. He dived over it. Some knee-deep rapids, bush, trees, shrubs, slashing at his face.

A bridge. A hand at his armpit, hoisting him. Two hands. They crested the bank.

“Up.”

They splattered onto the tarmac, lungs ablaze. He couldn't. He could barely vomit!

Hands pulled him up.

“This way.”

It was Jamina and Bonga. The road was uphill, so they helped him. He looked back for Leon. There was a figure pulling itself onto the tarmac behind them. It could be him; it could be a chaser.

They pulled each other on. The leg really was gone, and now that the adrenalin was wearing off, he really couldn't.

"Wait. Wait. Wait. Wait. I can't. I can't. Gotta stop."

For the first time, they briefly connected. Just quick eyes. The figure below weaved across the street. Bonga looked back...

"Leon?" Caleb asked.

"No. Come."

The meaning was off, but the implications were clear. They carried on. He threw a hand around Jamina. Bonga, still armed, had his hands free. They were approaching the intersection.

"You're going to have to walk yourself."

Weakness was a target. He pulled his hoodie up.

It was now more like climbing than walking. Hand to hand. They approximated the movements of the survivors. Primates. Calm, but killer. They paused to scout for opportunities, lest they become one.

Climbing down from a wreck, one blocked their path and sniffed at them. He was somehow placated when he recognised something of their scent. He retreated, eyes downcast. He was more outnumbered than anything else.

And there at the entrance to the avenue, still there, stood Sabelo the Robot Guy. Same as he ever was. No black bag. A staff and a blazing torch. A nod. No more sycophancy, but recognition. I see you.

As the wrecks become less frequent, it called for walking.

“I can’t,” he mumbled after two steps.

“We crawl,” said Jamina, and they all dropped to their hands and feet and shambled, like apes. The three of them.

“Just don’t stop.”

He... the pain. It felt like a shin fracture and the angle wasn’t helping. But the body drag can sometimes pass for a leopard crawl.

As they crawled, there came a shout, then footfalls.

A human shape at the previous intersection was visible. Five more followed shortly behind. They hauled him in, dragged him to the ground and began kicking him. They stopped to observe. It was Leon. Their weakest. One of them jumped on his skull, landing off centre and snapping his neck. The rest of them began stomping the body.

“It was a waste of time,” said Bonga. “We got Leon killed.”

“We needed to do that,” said Caleb. “And Leon was going to die anyway. You could feel it.”

“He’s right,” said Jamina. “We needed to get out of here. This place is killing us. Staying home is for scared people and old people. They will only ever respect us if

we raid. We've got to get out there again. Next time we must kill them."

"Next time?" said Bonga. "You want to do that again?"

"Yes! We must become raiders like them. We have a stronger base. We have water, shelter, food. The block can be ours. We just need to kill more of them. They are weak, they follow power. We must show ourselves."

"But what do we have to show our power with?"

"We have weapons, organisation, some people. Cars."

"We have people, but no fighters. How could we just leave Leon like that?"

"We had no choice. Like you say, we have no fighters. But we need more. Or we must become fighters. We must get everyone. We can all be warriors. You can surprise yourself."

"We must get the mad one..."

"Denver?"

"He can fight... You can see. He has that switch."

Caleb had been savouring the exquisite pain of his shattered leg, but his lieutenants spoke the truth.

"First, we must fetch Leon's body. We burn it here where he lived. We must respect our dead to show how we respect our living. Then... then we head out again. We speak to every resident. All must fight, or defend. No more hideaways. We go door to door. Unit 1 to Unit 22. Every person. Child-minders can stay behind. That will be the equal of fighting and defending. You either mind a child, or you fight to kill."

“And Denver?” asked Bonga.

“We need fighters and child minders. He must tell us which he is.”

“Who will he tell that to?”

“Us. We go now. We do it for Anne and Leon. And Solomon.”

It was not a time for reasoning. They had formed a gang, and they remained a gang. Caleb, Bonga and Jamina now. In the name of their fallen, would-be comrades, they went out into the complex and beat on doors. Where they were barricaded, they vaulted walls. They kicked at windows.

“Trustees!” they announced themselves, then kicked in the doors. There were fighters among them. The raid would make the complex even more of a target. They needed all to come out and fight. It was conscription. It was a press gang. It was kidnapping. It was necessary. All complied but one.

Unit 8 fought them. She fought hard, but they outnumbered her. She had a fire poker, but they got it off her and gouged her eye. She fell bleeding, but she was the only one.

The rest all came along. Even Denver.

He bellowed from inside when they kicked at his door.

“What do you want?”

“Come fight. We need you to fight!”

“Fight for who?”

“For the complex. Against the survivors!”

“What are we fighting for?”

“Safety and freedom. Are you a fighter or a child-minder?”

“I’m not going to give myself a name. But I will come fight.”

He allowed them into his unit. He had finished all of his alcohol.

“Listen here,” he said. “You want me to fight, I come fight. But that doesn’t mean I won’t come kill you one day. You not making a friend here today. You recruiting a fighter.”

The others looked at Caleb and he nodded, feeling he would one day be a target. But that was inevitable either way. Whether this person stayed in his unit, or came out with them, one day he would come for them. Perhaps better to have him in the raiding party than hiding out in his unit, biding his time.

“Do you want to raid or guard?”

“I want to be a trustee like you are. I’m not here to fight under orders. I’ll fight if you tell me what for.”

“Why do you need a reason?” asked Caleb.

“Why can’t you give me a reason?”

“I’ve told you. Safety and freedom.”

“That’s a bullshit reason. What are we trying to do? What is our strategy? Who are our enemies? Who is our leader? Is it you?”

“Yes. I am the leader now.”

“Okay? So?”

“So... we must defend the complex from the survivors, but ultimately... Ultimately...”

It was the first time Caleb had been forced to express, to articulate. And it came in the form of a challenge. If you don’t have a vision, then I will have one, it said. And already it felt violent. Denver’s violence was what they had come looking for, and violence they would get.

“Ultimately, we must start a new community. We cannot just defend and protect the last of what he have left from before. We will run out – of food, of water, of people. The only way for us to survive is to grow. And the only way to grow is to bring more people into our group. They are out there, outside the gate. Not all survivors are sufferers and mutants. We don’t have to kill everyone beyond that gate. Some are the same as us. Perhaps somewhere there is another complex, another bunch of people, scared, but surviving, who believe in the things we believe in, and we can join ourselves with them so that we become stronger and together we can protect and grow...”

“And what do you believe in?” asked Denver.

“We believe in growth. We want to grow what there is. We want more food, more water, more people, more ways that we can live better. Despite what happened.”

“But what if there is no more? If, like you say, everything has turned off, and there is no power, no communication, no food, no water... How can you grow? What if all that there is, is what is left over from before, and all you can do is fight for the scraps until it’s all finished... How are you going to grow then, when the resources are finite?”

“We don’t believe that. We believe that there are always ways for us to grow. There is enough for more of us. And there are ways to use what there is more creatively so that it goes further. You can eat mielies, but you can also farm mielies and feed thousands of people. It doesn’t just matter what you have. It matters what you do with it. And we want to grow, not just consume.”

“But for you to grow, others must die,” said Denver. “You don’t have to kill them with your own hands for them to die. But if you take another man’s mielies, and it’s the last mielies in the world... then you might as well be smashing him...”

“If we can grow those mielies, instead of fighting just to eat them, then we can both eat, and eat for years. That last corn can feed the two of us, and our children. If we just have faith in the future, without scrambling to finish the last of what’s left over from our parents.”

“The future... our children... You talk like a priest, or a politician,” Denver spat.

“If that is so, then... I don’t know. Maybe I am a politician, or some kind of priest. All I know is, I’m not going to sit here in fear, waiting to be killed by the survivors. And I’m not going to fight in the ruins for the last scraps of what’s left from before. While there is sun and there is soil, and while there is land, and while rain still falls on the earth, I know we can grow food. And while there are still people who believe in the same things we do, we can grow ourselves and become more. And when we are more, we can spread our ideas and bring more people into our community. That will make us stronger. Then we can grow and defend ourselves.”

“How can you grow and say you’re defending yourself at the same time?” asked Denver.

“All we ask is that our people be able to grow our own food, on our own land. Anyone who will not allow us to do that... we will fight them. We will defend ourselves against them.”

“I can support that,” said Bonga, getting to his feet. “I’m also sick of cowering and clutching onto the last of the tins Leon stored in his ceiling. I’m sick of living off the dregs of the swimming pool, and hiding barricaded inside this patch of concrete, terrified of who might come over the walls at night. There is more land and more supplies for us out there. And we can use it to grow. We just need to stand together, patrol together

and yes, fight together when we need to. We can make it ours, and we can use it to grow what we stand for.”

Denver sneered. He was on his feet, but arms folded. His eyes down at his feet, he shook his head and gave a small smile.

“You people are so proud to talk about growing what you stand for and what you believe in, but how do you even know that you stand for the same things? What do you believe in that you want to grow it so much? What do you stand for? If you want me to come on your patrols so I can be stabbed by those others outside, what must I do it for? I still don’t see how you people are better than the ones out there. All you are doing is fighting for what’s left. What is the difference between us and them? And how do you know that they aren’t having a meeting somewhere talking about how they want to grow and how they need more so they can grow, and that means they have to capture our complex... places like this? What makes us better than them?”

“We don’t say we are better than them,” said Jamina. “We say we believe what we believe. And we will fight anyone who tries to stop us being us.”

“So, what do you believe?” Denver screamed. “Somebody please tell me! We’ve been standing here for hours by this empty pool talking about what we believe in, and no one can actually tell me what that is. What! Do! You! Believe! In?”

There was a pause, and the handful of people at the meeting looked at Caleb. Even the quiet Chinese man from Unit 10, and the lady with the child from Number 17. They looked at Caleb.

So, he limped across to the complex notice board and he found the whiteboard marker. He took up the eraser and removed the old notices, those scrawled monuments to before.

“Tree felling Monday, 17/10. Joe will be coming to prune the trees. Leave garden doors unlocked for access.”

“SGM. Meeting Tuesday 1/11. Repairing wall on Stables side.”

“Maid. Nomsa is honest and hard-working. She has been with us for five years. She is looking for another two days a week in the complex. 8 till 4. Call Anne 089 940 9991.”

Caleb took up the eraser and wiped these relics of former times from the walls of the pool house. Then he carefully replaced the eraser and took up the marker. In red capitals, at the top of one panel of the whiteboard, he wrote, “Beliefs”, and then turned around.

“Okay, let’s agree. Let’s decide what we believe in. Who wants to start?”

“We believe in life,” said Bonga. Not killing. Someone should be allowed to continue living. They should not just be stomped in the street like Leon because he is old

and tired... like... a weak animal behind the troop. That was... I don't know..."

"I agree," said Caleb. The standing was hell on his leg, and it reminded him of the life-or-death battles of the last sortie. He hobbled to the whiteboard, pen in hand, and he wrote...

"LIFE"

What about growth?" he asked. "Can I write growth? Like we were saying, do we agree that we believe in growth more than just taking, more than gathering? There were nods. Denver was sullen, but he said nothing. Caleb took that as assent, and he wrote...

"GROWTH"

"What about the future," suggested the lady from Unit 17, the one with the child. "Sorry everyone, I'm Tasneem. Hi... Can we say we believe in the future? Or is that the same as growth?"

"What about the past?" asked the Chinese man. "I am Philip. You can't say respect the future if you don't respect the past. The future is built upon the foundations of the past. The reason these people are killing us is because they don't respect what others have done to build what we have now. They are just destroying the past, and while they do that, they destroy the future."

"Forget about the past! Fuck the past!"

It was Michael. Awkward and almost invisible, he was the only teen in the complex. Arms lanky and too

long. Torso suddenly defined. Gait not yet established. Even he had seemed unsure whether he should join the adults. He had been on no patrols, had kept to his unit. But he was Leon's son, and now with the death of Leon, he must have felt himself entitled, or obliged to join.

"Fuck the past. Whatever happened, happened because of the past. I don't know what it was... it could have been war, or just using up all the coal, or sabotage... I don't know. But whatever caused it came from the past. I say we need a new start. We must believe in the future. If we believe in the past, it's all just going to happen again!"

A greying man in a collared green T-shirt spoke. "It could have been a tsunami. Or a meteor, or some kind of magnetic wave from space! It could have been completely random. We can't blame the past for everything that happens. Some things just happen! It's not all a massive pile of foundations built on top of each other. One thing doesn't always cause the next thing. I think the reason we're here is because something unforeseen happened. It was not caused by the past, it was an outlier, a random event. But I agree that we need to look forward, especially because we don't understand what happened. I don't think we ever will. Even though the past has a role to play, and we can learn from it, I think we must look forward. We must grow for the future."

“What about love?” asked Caleb, playing devil’s advocate. “Should I write love?”

“What is love, if not love for life?” asked the widow from number 15. “You’ve already written love, if you’ve written life. Caleb considered for a second, then decided to leave the issue.

“So, is that it? Two beliefs? Life and Growth?”

There were no further suggestions. He replaced the whiteboard marker on the sill.

“Right. Then let’s make it happen,” he said.

Denver had been seated, eyeing his own boot, as he kicked at an imaginary stone on the paving.

“Who’s got guns?”

“I have,” said the widow. “A Glock that belonged to my husband.”

“I have,” said the man in the collared shirt. “A Beretta. And a CZ-75”

“Anyone else,” asked Denver, looking up for the first time at the assembled body corporate, and then at the two gun owners. Those are good guns. You got ammo for those things?”

“Of course.”

“I think so. I must have.”

“Because I tell you what I think. It’s very nice to talk about love and growth and all of that, but it’s going to come down to firepower sooner or later. There’s more of them than there are of us, so all that will stop them from killing us is guns. You can get lucky once in a while,

or you can fight for your life and win. But guns is always going to beat no guns.”

The meeting was silent. As they tend to be when someone says something unpopular, but true.

“I’m not going out on any patrol unless we’ve got guns with us. Just saying. If it’s true that there’s no more law and order like you say, and people are getting eaten in the streets, I’m not going out there unless I’m armed. That’s all I’m saying. I’m not scared, but I’m not stupid. A man could get hurt out there.”

“Since when are you a believer in law and order?” the widow ejaculated. “You’ve been selling drugs from your unit for the past year! Who do you think you are to come and lecture us about breaking the law and what’s dangerous!”

He smiled down at his boot and said, “That was before. Law and order means nothing now.”

“It will again one day,” said Caleb.

But his words felt flat, and he sensed that he was losing them.

“For now, we fight for life, and for growth, but one day we will have peace, even if it’s just in whatever corner, whatever piece of land we’re able to secure for ourselves. One day.”

“Ja,” muttered Denver to his shoes. “One day is one day.”

Bonga was on morning patrol with Chris, the man in the collared shirt. If the action was a pulse beat, they could sense that after the killing of Leon, there would be a spell of quiet. The killings, too, seemed to throb to the rhythm of life.

“Not much happening.”

“Not much. Wanna go back onto the roof?”

“Might as well. Good view of the street.”

A makeshift set of stairs had been assembled. The roof of number 1 was a popular vantage point. It afforded a view down the street towards the intersection. It was also blessed with almost day-long sunshine, so people had taken to leaving their batteries out on that section of roof, to grab what solar charge they could. Someone’s cellphone had even been left out...

“Ddddt.”

It vibrated.

“Ddddt.”

“Whose phone is this?”

“No idea.”

Bonga picked it up. A tiny white, palm-size Samsung. It had been left face down, with its back off and its innards exposed. He looked at the screen.

“There’s a message!”

“What’s it say?”

“Have a look.”

The text consisted of four words...

“COME TO THE FARM.”

“Whose phone is this?”

“I think we need another trustees meeting.”

The meeting was called. All surviving units were represented – only Denver was not present.

The phone belonged to Michael, the son of Leon.

“It’s from Uncle Oscar! I should have known he would get something going.”

“Where is his farm,” asked Caleb. “Do you know where? Could you find it? Have you been?”

“I’ve been once, when I was young.”

Caleb spat into the shrubbery.

“When I was younger. I think my father took me to a wedding there. It’s down south somewhere. I think it’s in the Eastern Cape. He was a sheep farmer, I think. But I’m not sure if he has sheep any more. The farm is in the mountains. When we went, we had to phone for directions the whole way in. I’m not sure if I could find it again.”

The text may have been sent minutes before the grid went down. It must have landed now as a ghost message, a remnant, a legacy, as the phone scrambled just enough solar charge to retrieve its incoming data.

“But you would be able to get close?”

“I think so. It’s near Barkly East...”

“You would leave us?” asks the fat old man with the unfinished gazebo from number 4. “You would leave us and escape to this farm?”

“Whoever this message is from, he’s not inviting the whole world to his farm,” said the widow. “He is gathering his family. It’s none of our business. We don’t invite ourselves to someone else’s dinner.”

“It’s not dinner. It’s survival.”

“It’s his homestead.”

“It’s a message to the world. We received it!”

“It is a text to his nephew!”

“This isn’t a time to worry about protocol.”

“But you know him!”

“We know your uncle?”

“He used to live here in the complex. He lived with my dad and I when I was young. Oscar. He worked in Johannesburg for a bit, but he didn’t like it and he went back to the farm.”

“Oscar? The big man?”

“Yes.”

“The man who lifted the car?”

“Yes.”

“That’s right! I remember! A man was changing a tyre in the complex, and the vehicle fell off the jack and crushed him. Oscar was there. He lifted the car off the man and he was saved!”

“A person can do that?”

“He did it! I was there!”

“He worked in a printing business. Wore khaki clothes?”

“Yes. That’s him.”

“Was he the guy who chased off the robbers when they got into Miss Heerendien’s unit?”

“Yes! She screamed and he was the first one there. I remember that guy. He was on the neighbourhood watch.”

“Oscar!”

“Right... Oscar. I never met him. But I heard about him.”

“He is my father’s brother. He *was* my father’s brother. He used to take me to play school with Wendy.”

“With who?”

“Wendy. She used to live in Unit 16. Denver’s unit.”

“When someone else lived there?”

“No. Denver lived there already. But he used to have a daughter. I don’t know what happened to her. Maybe she moved to go live with her mom. A little girl my age.”

“Your age?”

“We were in the same class back then.”

“There is a girl in that house. Bonga has seen her.”

“I have. But she’s only... she can’t be older than 12! She’s thin. She was naked when I saw her. But I’ve only seen her that once. And one other time I thought I heard a child crying. Otherwise... I don’t think she’s there any longer.”

“Do you think it could be her?”

“No, this one is too young. She’s only this tall.”

“We need to find out if she’s still there. We know who lives in every unit. If he is keeping someone in there, we need to know about it. We can’t keep people captive.”

“We need to know everyone who lives here.”

“Let’s go over there.”

“Yeah. Let’s ask him who he’s got in there.”

“You can’t hide people. How long has it been? You can’t hide people in your house for 15 years!”

“Let’s go! We’re going to Unit 16.”

“Go fetch your gun. Have you got your gun? He wants to see guns so much, let’s show him a gun.”

“I’ve got my Taser. Let’s Tase the bastard! Wonder what the hell us he’s been doing to her for 15 years.”

The meeting was now a mob. It had no leader. Or its leadership was diffuse, decentralised. Caleb moved out of the lapa and into the driveway down towards Unit 9. They followed him as one. In the corridor outside Unit 16, as if he had sensed it, he encountered Denver. He was topless, in a pair of sleeping shorts.

“Can I help you?”

“Who have you got in there?”

“Where is she?”

“Where’s the girl?”

“Where are you hiding her?”

“Bring her out or we’ll get her ourselves.”

“Bring her out!”

“There’s no one in here!”

“Lies! Bring her out!”

“It’s empty! Have a look if you want!”

“Go in. Go in! He’s hiding her. Let’s find her!”

“Where is she!”

“He’s hiding her!”

“Wendy! Wendy, where are you?”

“Wendy! Come out!”

The mob surged into the corridor and then crammed into the doorway. Ten, a dozen people. They fell into the unit. Clumsy, people began opening cupboards, doors, looking into rooms. Under beds, behind the sparse furniture.

“Wendy?”

“Wendy!”

“Wendy!”

There was no other person in the unit. People began bumping into each other in the lounge room. Like ants without a queen, they lost direction.

“I told you. There is no one in this house.”

“There’s no one here.”

“Have you looked in the ceiling?”

“There’s no ceiling. It’s a ground-floor unit.”

Then Denver reappeared. This time he was armed. A Glock. Aiming at people's heads.

"I can also come here with weapons and act all heavy. Now get the fuck out. There's no one else in this place. Wendy is long gone. You people are insane. Out! Now!"

Chastened, they began to leave. Janice from Unit 3 half-heartedly checked the broom closet.

"Hey! Fuck outta here!"

The patrol was a supply run. Food rations were nearly finished, water was low, and sanitation was becoming a concern. Every resident was carrying an illness of some kind. They were to build a communication attempt into the mission. To see if there had been any further texts. The patrol consisted of Michael, Jamina, Bonga and Denver.

The plan was to scout Sandton City, the enormous mall a kilometre from the complex. Again, it was likely to be overrun with survivors, infested with sufferers, but the alternatives were slim. In the city, with no primary food sources, the stores were the only option. Leon's survivalism had kept them self-sufficient for a month, but now they were in the same desperate scramble for survival as everyone else. They had to learn the skills late in the game.

There were hopes that after a month, conditions would be beginning to account for more of their adversaries. Illness, weakness, death... The battle for survival was becoming a zero sum. They could only exist at the expense of others. To live, others must die. Finite resources had to be taken from others.

There was talk of using a vehicle. The road seemed open in the direction away from the intersection. But they decided to send the foot patrol to scout conditions before risking precious fuel – and a vehicle that would become a liability the minute they encountered a roadblock. They were sure to encounter a roadblock.

The vehicle would be used later, for the breakout that was now being discussed openly. As supplies dwindled, it was becoming obvious that they could not stay. At least not all of them.

A detachment would need to be sent on the breakout, if only to scout beyond the city, to gauge their prospects in the immediate rural periphery. If this was their instinct, had others tried it? Were people already returning to the land, attempting to grow their own food? Whatever had happened to strip society to the bone, it did not seem toxic. The air was no more nor less poisonous than it had been before. The sun no more intense. The rain still fell. Plants still grew.

What happened had taken down the network, but not nature. This made a nuclear cause unlikely,

according to the consensus in the driveway, where the residents communed to compare conjecture.

A nuclear plant meltdown would also be a gradual apocalypse. There would have been news reports describing the disaster, followed perhaps by a slow spread of radiation. This had been an instant, and total shutdown of all services and all communication.

What happened must also have been global. If it were local, help would have been arrived. Assistance would have come from outside within a few days, a week. If it was a natural disaster, relief crews would have been sent. It would also have been obvious. Floods, earthquakes, storms... fires. They don't happen in secret.

A popular uprising was suggested. A revolution, an attack, some kind of coup. Even an invasion, a war. But again, these things developed, they made news. An attack could take down the infrastructure, but not all of it at once. Word would get out. But no. There had been nothing. All they had was speculation, rumour and myth.

It was beginning to seem like this was it. They found themselves catapulted back to the stone age, bearing the legacy implements of the 21st century, but without any of the technology needed to support it. No power, no internet, no cloud.

The first weeks were brutal and lawless. The looting, the killing was almost instant. Like a switch had been flipped. But if he thought back, Caleb realised the collapse had been more of a culmination than an

aberration. Which of the violence and the outrages they had witnessed were unprecedented? Few, if any.

Murders had been a regular occurrence in the time before. Less common, but not unusual. Violence was something one saw, if not daily, then weekly. A fight at the shopping complex over a parking space. A bar brawl. Road rage. A mugging. Domestic violence.

The networks had also been under pressure. The power would fail periodically. Water outages were nothing remarkable. Phone lines could go down. The internet could fail. Nothing was particularly reliable. Standards slipped, and expectations along with them. But still.

Never this!

Another possibility haunted Caleb. Something else. The idea that whoever, or whatever had caused this, was picking them off. First, they took the network down, turned everything off, and then they methodically worked through the population and eliminated them, settlement by settlement.

This murderous infighting between desperate humans was but a sideshow. The fight for survival was inevitable, but it was a subtext, a parallel narrative. There were rapes and murders and killings during wars, but the main story was the war. The war was the reason, the cause, and it would reveal itself in different ways. But nothing would be resolved until the war ended.

If that was true, what was their war? When would it reveal itself? How would it reveal itself? What was it? Who was it?

Perhaps it was being played out in another location. Until it made its presence felt, they would have to busy themselves with the mundane realities of fighting for their lives.

They could not count on someone coming for them. Or coming for them in peace.

So, they were forced to band together. To forge a unit with what they had – an imperfect, motley band of residents. The old, the frail, the weak, the damaged, the evil. They needed all of them. All had something to contribute and all were bodies to be enlisted in the struggle for Life and Growth.

The day after the mob had gathered to free his imaginary captive, Denver served his first tour of duty on patrol. The supply and reconnaissance assignment to Sandton City.

He appeared at the guardhouse looking skittish and tense. Eyes red, sniffing and terse. He made no mention of the previous day's face-off.

“Morning.”

“Morning.”

“You ready?”

“Sure.”

“What you bringing?”

“Got my Glock. You?”

“Borrowed the CZ75.”

“Okay.”

Jamina would be mission leader.

“Okay. So, we will try the back roads this time. Linden into Daisy Street, then up the stairs to Stella Street. We will enter the mall via the square. Through the banking mall to the Checkers court. We’ll see if there is any food left. Try to get shopping trolleys. Whatever we find, we have to load up and bring back. Denver and I will provide cover. Michael and Bonga, you guys are to gather supplies. Anything we can use, but mainly food, medicine, water.

Michael, do you have your cell?”

“I do.”

“Have you been able to charge it?”

“I... I think so. I’ve left it out for the past two days. I think it’s got some charge.”

“We’re going to try to get up the tower. If we can get to altitude, we want you to turn the phone on briefly and check whether there have been any further texts. We want to see if there has been anything else from Uncle Oscar. Then we want to try to send him a message.”

“Any questions?”

“Will they try to stop us?”

“We don’t know. We’ve not gone out this way before.”

“I don’t have a weapon. I’m not used to fighting.”

“Don’t worry. That’s not your role. Denver and I will look out for attackers. We’ll move quickly and try to avoid contact. If we are spotted, and any of them come at us, we will eliminate them. Your job is to keep moving. We will maintain the diamond shape. You and Bonga front and back. Denver and I left and right.”

They dropped over the wall as the first dawn rays crested the roofs of the complex.

The street was deserted, and with fewer wrecks on the road, less potential danger. They made good time, using the rhythmic military jog they had adopted the previous time.

“The aim is not to get tired,” Jamina said. “Are you okay.”

“My chest is tight,” said Michael. “Maybe I’m just nervous.”

They came up Linden Street by the park, with the rising sun at their backs, throwing their shadows ahead of them like dancing spectres. These days, the park was a settlement of tents and shacks. The river was still flowing, but as they crossed it, the stench of sewage told them it now had one primary use.

A whistle went up as they rounded the park into Daisy Street. A sentry had spotted them, no doubt. But the park settlement seemed to be a defensive camp. The inhabitants expected attacks, and braced for them, but they weren’t in the business of launching them. They

maintained pace as they crossed Rivonia. As they approached the stairs, Jamina motioned for them to stop. She and Denver went up ahead.

As soon as they stepped onto the stairs there came some movement up above. A cry. The sound of bodies in motion.

“Hey!”

“Tsst!”

She made an instant decision.

“Back, back, back. Withdraw! Back to the road. Denver! Back to the road. We take the other way. Come, back!”

The risk, and the disturbance of an action before they reached the mall was too much. They had seen the results of alerting the neighbourhood to a patrol. But Denver remained transfixed halfway up the stairs. He had drawn his pistol.

“Denver! Withdraw!”

Still he stood. Gun drawn. No reaction. He made no eye contact.

From the top of the stairs, two hoodies peered over the wall. Denver took aim and fired off two shots. Both missed.

One head reappeared. It ducked back down.

Denver was now taking cover behind the wall, but the rest of them were sitting ducks. A third hoodie appeared and Denver fired again. This time the figure

remained standing. Possibly hit. But then he raised a weapon and got off a shot of his own.

Bonga flinched. He'd also been hit.

"Withdraw. Withdraw! Back to the complex!"

Denver fired again and this time the armed assailant dropped.

A series of whistles came from the park behind them.

"Okay! We go back! Denver!"

She was screaming now. Bonga staggered against her. In his shoulder, a bolt was embedded and he was bleeding. There were more whistles.

"Okay, we're going back! Denver! We're returning home! Michael take the other side of him!"

With an arm over Jamina and Michael, Bonga was capable of a swift walk, but nothing more. They crossed Rivonia back towards the park. At the gates, they met a patrol. Four marchers.

"Passing by! Passing by!" she shouted. Open palm aloft. The patrol leader brought their group to a halt. They remained silent, but observed as they stumbled past with Bonga.

"Passing by!"

From the direction of the stairs, more shots erupted. She looked back. Denver was firing on the patrol!

One of the patrol fell hit, and the rest of them drew weapons and dropped to the ground. Immediately, she drew her own weapon and fired three shots at the

patrollers, from point-blank range. She hit two of them in the head, and the third in the throat.

There were more cries from within the park.

Denver came sprinting past. Firing wildly as he ran. He was shooting into the park. One shot ricocheted off the park fencing. He kept running, leaving Jamina the only armed fighter and staggering under Bonga's weight. He was losing strength. They staggered on. Inside the park, another patrol was following them along the fence, carrying pangas and knives. The clink of metal on metal. They were beating the palisade with their weapons. That was the sound.

"Ting!"

"Ting!"

"Ting!"

"Ting!"

"Keep going. Just keep going! Bonga, you need to help us!"

They were away from the park now, but battling the hill. There came more whistles behind them, but she dared not look back. She could feel the rhythm of marchers. The metal on metal.

Ting!

Ting!

Ting!

Ting!

"I got you!"

Denver appeared. He took Jamina's side of Bonga.

"Let's go! Let's go!"

They accelerated, and soon they had crested the hill and were rounding the corner. The complex was in sight. She sprinted ahead to raise the alarm back at the complex. They would need help lifting Bonga over the wall.

Her whistle alerted Caleb on the guardhouse roof. He was swiftly down onto the street and assisting with Bonga, now delirious. There were three detachments of park gangs on their heels. Hoisting Bonga onto his shoulders, he was able to pull himself up the gate and then ease Bonga over the lip, where Ryan from Unit 2 was able to drag him over. Jamina fired a shot over the heads of the pursuers and they paused long enough for the complex patrol to drag themselves over the gate to safety. The guard team released pepper spray to keep the entrance clear.

"You sabotaged the mission!"

"What you mean! I saved your life! Without me you would have been eaten by that patrol."

"We were on good terms with the patrol until you fired on them!"

“Since when are we on good terms with anyone? It’s kill or be killed out there!”

“That was your first patrol. I gave you instructions. We were not to engage unless necessary. You came out blazing at the first excuse. You came out looking to kill. Now the park settlement are our enemies. Because of you! We’ll never get past them to the mall now...”

“Ah, the mall is nothing great anyway.”

“The mall is our only chance of supplies. And it’s the highest point in the city. We could have been able to communicate from there. You’ve destroyed everything, you idiot!”

“Without me you would be dead!”

“You came out to sabotage our mission, you coward. Firing your weapon is easy. It takes more bravery and strength to survive without violence, you weak, weak man. You coward! You don’t even have the strength to control your urges. You weakling. You simple animal.”

She was in his face, spitting her fury in his eyes. He stared her down, fighting the very impulse to violence she accused him of. He was losing.

Caleb knelt over Bonga, unconscious. The bolt wound in his shoulder had begun to congeal. Some kind of crossbow projectile. He contemplated removing the arrow, snapping it off, or perhaps pushing it through the shoulder.

He removed his shirt. If he pressed the shaft through, it would need immediate binding. Without treatment, it

would fester. Left as it was, it would become infected. While Bonga slept, he might be able to burn it clean.

Caleb walked to the pool area, to the pool house. He returned with a container of chlorine powder.

“Hold him down,” he ordered Michael. “He’s going to scream.”

“You two as well.”

Jamina and Denver paused their showdown to come to Bonga’s aid, such as it was.

“I’m going to press the arrow through. The two of you hold the shoulders down.”

With his breadknife, he cut Bonga’s shirt from his body, then using the butt of the handle, he began to press down on the jagged edge of the broken shaft. The pain brought Bonga back to consciousness. He roared like a bear, eyes erect in their sockets. Tongue purple. The sound of raw, animal presence. Denver and Jamina fought to hold him down as he strained to tear back at Caleb.

“Michael! Press down with me. It’s stuck inside. We need to get it through. Press it!”

Michael leaned over Caleb and brought his entire body weight to bear on the end of the arrow. It gouged deeper through the sinew, the ligaments, the flesh...

“Push! Push! It’s coming through! Push!”

“Aaaargh!”

“Push! Push!”

“Aaaaaargh!”

“Hold him. I’m coming back!”

A second time, Caleb ventured to the pool house. He returned with a pair of pliers.

“Turn him over.”

With Bonga face down on the paving, he placed his boot on the back of his neck. Using the breadknife, he cut open the bulging skin where the arrowhead was pressing through. Blood burst from the wound. He wiped it with the heel of his hand and the point became visible. He plunged the pliers into the wound, slipped, tried again, and found purchase. Pulling now, against the resistance of the flesh, he dragged the arrow through. Inch by inch.

“Aaaaargh!”

It pulled through. Blood and sinew erupted from the wound as Caleb lost his footing and fell on his back. He landed back to back with Bonga, sprawled across his prone form. Tissue clung to the arrow. Caleb clutched the pliers and the arrow to his breast, like a doctor with a tiny, fresh foetus.

He stood, measured out a cup of chlorine and poured it into the wound.

“Turn him over again.”

He did the same to the other side. Bonga arched his back and frothed yellow foam from his mouth, writhing, possessed by pain, across the drive. He threw off Denver and Jamina and howled like a wolf in a trap.

“Aaaaaargh!”

“Okay. Hold him again. We need to bind him.”

All three of them climbed aboard the shattered body and strapped the shreds of Caleb’s garment across his torso. Caleb ignored his oaths, slapping his face to shock him just long enough that he would hold still.

“Okay. He’s done. Leave him”

They stood, surveying their handiwork. Like they had freed an unwilling bear from a trap.

The Gables had been too quiet. The complex across the road had never been a community centre. As the largest complex in the neighbourhood, they must have seen themselves as a community all of their own.

They had never been part of the policing forum; their residents had no presence at the election days. They gave no input at the urban planning meetings. All you knew was they had the big facade on the street, with the entry and the exit gates. They had the biggest guard house and their own traffic system.

The word from people who had been to look at show houses at the Gables was that the complex had a dedicated road network, complete with traffic signs, road markings and rules of the road indicated around the walls of the place.

The Gables had its own architectural theme, unlike La Colonia and its immediate neighbours, which had all been built at the same time, in a Tuscan mode. The Gables took a flat-roofed approach. Bevels to the wall edges. A deep grey hue to its colour scheme, square picture windows, where the others had gone for cottagey wooden frames hiding behind boxed Spanish bars, the product of one break-in too many. The victory of fear over aesthetics.

The Gables had been the first complex to cotton on to the trend of SUVs supplanting sedans, the first to send phalanxes of sunglassesed wives out into the world in metallic 4X4s, oblivious to their immediate surroundings, en route to yoga classes, kickboxing and horse-riding lessons for their fashionably afro-sporting children.

The Gables was the first complex to build a boundary wall and to do away with postboxes. The Gables was the first complex to embrace smartphone-activated intercom systems.

The Gables had fibre-to-the-home installed before any other complex on the street had any idea what it was. Indeed, the pavement outside The Gables was constantly being excavated to install fibre-optic cables for some new form of digital connectivity.

This time, the disruption would be physical. If the Gables held themselves aloof from the surrounding

residential complexes, their loss would be nothing to mourn.

Logically, the biggest complex in the neighbourhood must have the largest supply stores.

There had certainly been no sign of patrols emanating from The Gables. No survivors coming in or out. Their gates had been barricaded like those of every complex on the street. Sometimes heads could be seen peering over the walls of the guard house. Once, Vivian from number 5 had reported hearing gunshots from within the compound while she was on duty. Besides that, there were no clues to the goings-on at The Gables.

For some reason, there had also been no raids on the Gables from outside. No sign of desperate survivors scaling the walls, no blazing logs lobbed into the shady trees that towered over the complex. No petrol bomb attacks. No attempts to ram the gates.

There had also been no overtures of solidarity from the complex across the way. No talk of forging an alliance. No attempts at building a united front against the common threat of the survivors in the car wrecks, against the survivors in the valley between them and the highway, where the crisp rhythm of metal against metal still rang out nightly.

Ting!

Ting!

Ting!

Ting!

If that terrifying sound couldn't spur them to action, what could? Were they not human, these people at The Gables? Why had they not joined the fight? They were either with the fighters for life and growth, or they were not. Their actions had spoken eloquently on their behalf.

The next mission was clear.

If you will not share what you have, it will be taken from you. If you hold yourself aloof from the daily lives of those around you, you cannot expect them to support you in times of hardship. If you do not identify with the struggle of your fellows, soon they will realise that you are part of what they are struggling against.

The raid on The Gables would take place at night. It would involve two approaches, both from the far side of the complex. One would come in over the old service gate on the park side of the complex. The other around the corner from there. Over the wall in Willowbrook Place. If both raids succeeded in entering the complex, they could join forces quickly and then move back through the Gables on the open roads towards the gate house. From there, they would be able to scale the gate and easily return to their home complex with their supplies.

It was a supply run.

Jamina had once had a girlfriend in the complex. In the days before her and Caleb. She knew the layout. The

rear of the compound had a clubhouse that may have been used as a community centre by the other trustees. It may also have been a supply depot or a second guard house. It was some distance from the main guard house, and support would be slow to arrive, if the word even reached them. From there, the key was to hit every residential unit on the route to the exit – hard, quickly, and as a group.

Some of the units would be empty, burnt-out relics of a former life. Like the units were at La Colonia. Some would be store houses, presciently stocked by paranoid residents who had seen the writing on the wall in the time before. Like the units were at La Colonia.

They would need to ascertain the status of each unit as quickly as possible. Then, where necessary, gain entry and take possession of the supplies they required.

They would have to fight their way out, so there would need to be the right balance between transport logistics and fighting personnel in the two patrols. Caleb recommended two patrols of four people, each consisting of two members to carry provisions and two to provide defensive or offensive support.

That way, if the patrols were unable to meet up, or became separated at any point, they would each be able to conduct the mission independently and complete it without needing support from the other patrol.

Each patrol would be equipped with both silent and percussive weapons. They would remain surreptitious

as far as possible, but when the necessity arose, they would use optimum force.

Caleb himself would lead the first patrol, which would come over on the park side. Jamina would lead the second, which would come over on Willowbrook Place. It would be a midnight raid. With stealth being so important, there was no reason to risk an early-morning mission, when survivors were more likely to be awake.

As planned, the patrols left the complex at midnight, and adopted a walking, double-diamond formation.

Jamina's patrol went ahead, and opened up a gap over the second group. There would be no further attempts at contact until they next saw each other.

She led the patrol with hand signals, rounding the corner into Willowbrook within five minutes. After a few metres, she brought the group to a halt behind a stand of succulents,

In silence, she indicated for two of them to help her step up and scout the other side of the wall. It was an unremarkable back garden, similar to those at their complex. The lawn offered an ideal landing spot.

Jamina climbed onto the wall so that she was straddling the electric fence. She reached down and assisted her fellow residents onto the wall. When they were all up, they jumped, dropped and rolled in turn. They hugged the wall in silence. Through a glass sliding door of the unit, she spied used bedding. The unit was

being lived in. Where there are living people, there are supplies.

The patrol formed a line behind her. At her signal, she kicked at the lock of the door and the others pushed in behind her. Whether it was her kick, or the combined scrum force of the patrol, the door yielded.

They burst in, knives drawn. She plunged her knife into the bedding, soon finding it unoccupied. Still silent, they entered the kitchen. The unit was in cool darkness. In the cupboards, they found cans. The provisions team took over, filling their backpacks, while she and Michael checked the other rooms.

In the first bedroom, they found a person sleeping. Silently, they slit the person's throat. They never even knew it. In the second bedroom, the shape of a child. Jamina hesitated. Michael too.

"Tssst."

The provisions team was ready to move on.

Jamina picked up a pillow. She bent over the sleeping form of the child. Perhaps five years old. She placed the pillow over the head of the child.

"Tsst. Tsst."

Job unfinished, she stood and left the room. Michael behind her.

The front door of the unit would not open. Locked!

Michael could sense Jamina rolling her eyes. They assumed the formation. She kicked the handle, they pressed through behind her. The door lock gave with a

crack, and they burst out onto the street. As they emerged, the sound of a child crying echoed out of the unit behind them.

“Daddy? Daddy? Daddy!”

Jamina looked at Michael. One of them would have to go back and silence the child. Then, the sound of running boots and whistles made the situation moot. They broke into a spring. In the dark, they still stood a chance of escape.

Rounding a corner, they collided with a group. Michael immediately slashed out with his knife.

“Life and Growth!” came the password, and he stopped. It was their comrades, the second patrol.

“We are detected. We must leave.”

“To the gatehouse!”

“No! Too far. Back through the house and over the wall.”

Just then, the Gables patrol arrived. One swing of a panga, and the head of one of their enemies left his shoulders. But then the time for weapons of silence was past.

Jamina drew the CZ-75 and fired. Four times, five times. Head shots. Bodies dropped. One head exploded particularly violently. Fluid flecked her face. She wiped her eyes clear and cast around for the next enemies. No one. One of them lay groaning. Not worth the ammunition.

“Back this way.”

They hurried back the way they had come. Their eight were still intact. The door hung ajar on its hinges. The child’s cries became clearer again as they re-entered the unit.

As they passed through the lounge out into the garden, Jamina caught the outline of the child, standing outside its parent’s bedroom, sobbing, crying out, but somehow knowing, unable to bring itself to enter the room and discover what it knew would be the end of hope.

“Daddy? Daddy?”

The voice of a girl.

In the garden, they slipped into their roles. Two together to boost the third up onto the wall. They helped the others up, and over. Jamina was the last to drop over. She cast a final glance back into the unit. The child stood in the garden, barefoot in a nightie. Hair in sleeping braids. Silent. Watching. Arms by her sides.

Jamina stepped off the wall. Landing, she dropped and rolled and broke into a jog. She was at the back of the patrol. They fell into the familiar rhythm. Their home complex was three minutes away. Exiting via the back wall would draw forces away from the Gables front guardhouse and allow them to return home without another contact, and perhaps without raising suspicions about where the attack had been launched from.

A successful mission.

No casualties of their own, but they had killed several defenders, and taken the life of a child's father.

How was that a success?

It was the others that had been the problem.

Michael knew had simply performed his role. He had dropped over the wall and absorbed the impact.

He had lobbed a firebomb into the trash pile, making sure to do it loudly enough to raise the alarm. He heard the patrol come running and then he had taken his gap.

He had had to avoid the patrol or they would have raised the alarm when he cut out.

There, he had done what was asked of him, but that was the previous night. That was complex business.

This was no one else's business. Tonight, he had to do what remained unresolved.

In the dark, chasing the shadows, he was almost undetectable. That patrol-oriented, four-person diamond formation was some macho display. He had yet to see it achieve anything beyond the loss of life and putting the complex under threat. They were not soldiers. They had no business going on patrols. They were desperate fugitives running for their lives. Best to act like it.

Tonight, he would do that, alone.

He followed the wall, staying on the grass, walking doubled over. Hoodie pulled low. His only weapon the spanner, he kept it inside his jacket. He walked just fast enough to keep his breath regular. The aim was not to get tired, as he had been taught.

Michael hugged the corners, and crossed the streets in their darkest patches.

He made darkness his guide. He would find his way via the shadows; he would no longer be using only those paths that crossed his direct presumptive route. Choosing a route was some legacy. These days he knew you followed the route the you were permitted to take. You could not choose a route. You found one.

It was a spiral path. Without streetlights, the darkness was not where you expected it. The undergrowth was pretty much where you wanted to be, in the shrubbery. In the bushes. Slow enough not to stumble. Purposeful and steady. In the darkness, following the bushes. Alone. Sniffing for the scent of shit, where the humans would be. Like a rat.

When he reached it, he just sat and watched. He kind of beheld the place. It still caught the stars on its façade. The wind was up, for once, and trash danced in eddies around the entrance he would have to use. He was under the bridge. There was no trace of anyone else yet, aside from when he had skirted the park and seen the tents. He had smelled a corpse.

The pedestrian entrance was intact. No barricades. Even some panes remained in their frames. The mall was like a temple that no one could bring themselves to desecrate. He knew that beyond, there was a lobby, where any arrivals would stand exposed. It offered no corners, no shadows to hug. Anyone entering the place would be backlit by the starlight, facing a cathedral of floors and escalators where any number of survivors could observe the person.

No, he would just feel the place for an hour. Just become one with this bush, feel the wind and await what it brought. Was it his imagination, or was there rain in the air?

Rain might bring something, as it often did. Some movement. Some dynamics. Someone's need to be somewhere else. Inside, outside. A different part of inside or outside. A better vantage point. Shelter.

Michael sat and he felt the building and he absorbed the approaching weather. He felt the spots. Lighting heralded itself, like flash photography. No angular shafts of it, just the sheets of light. It was somewhere. Lightning was out tonight, like he was.

Sure enough, a patrol emerged. Two patrols.

The flashes brought illumination; the growl of the sky provided cover for any furtive sound. The sheer violence of the strikes kept people under cover. The patrols and the lightning had the streets to themselves.

Soon he would have the benefit of the same. A storm would cover his approach. His entry into Sandton City. Soon enough nature's assault would begin, and he could ride shotgun.

And then it came. The sky cracked, grey and fresh. Explosions around the edges. The gallop of drops upon the earth. Something fell. The wash of sheets of spray across a wall. Branches arguing with the sky. Bombs detonating. The crust of the transmitting the trauma. Arrhythmic flashes. Roaring bears, lions. A ripping, like fabric. High pitched. A jagged outline of a torn border...

Edges shone moist and smooth.

Now everything. A lateral fork, twice; a crack! A whisper, a whish, a groan from the sky. A vertical stab into the earth, a sword impaled. Angry rain. The wind colder now. Sheets together, through each other, with the flashes, rolling words of warning interrupting. The drumbeat of rain in differing registers. Pitter-patter, drip-drip, shhh... Now the branches whipping the air. The scent of earth through it... gasoline, liberated from the tarmac. Oil ran inside the water in eddies along the gutters, the soil became mud. Double flashes, triples. The rumble ascended. Now like a crowd, like rough applause. Cannon shots across a valley. Then BANG!

An angry slap to the face. Self-administered, the shock out of nowhere, when you surprise yourself with your own volatility.

Then it seemed to withdraw. Glitching now. F-f-f-f-f-f-flashing. Quieter. Then a roiling discomfort, a growl. Breaking waves on rock below, a chasm. Then the real rain. The irrigation wash, heavier drops inside it. A flash, a crack with each other. That one was just here! Shshshshshshshsh...

Shewish! Another set of waves upon the rocks.

Crackling electricity inside the air. His hair rose on end. The sky aquamarine. Cyan!

A bolt from the very apex of the sky plunged into the spire and anchored it – three, four times. Like a wrecking ball rotating upon itself, the spire clung to the shaft. Time reset itself.

Michael shook off his hypnosis. Drenched through, he suddenly knew this was his moment. He pulled himself upright and broke into a jog. He entered at an angle, hugging the inner glass wall. The fusillades of the storm continued. In awe of it all, he felt absent, irrelevant. Who could notice him when he was barely aware of himself?

But the flashes also threw light inside the building. He needed its urgency. Suddenly he knew to run. Between slime blackness, instinctive memory and crisp illumination, he picked a way. He knew it. There were other people in motion, but again, insignificant. Who could impose themselves on such a moment? They were subject to it, hardly players. No protagonists. He would do for obscurity, as an incidental. They knew him no

more than he knew them. He broke through crowds, pushed people aside. No one can assert themselves in a storm. Who can make their presence felt in the face of nature?

He felt the way draw him forward. The concourse, the escalators, the office block. The fire escape. Still the flashes might penetrate. He knew. But by the stairs he faltered for once. Here was darkness, and within the darkness, someone might make their home. But he waited only for a second. He was here, he had speed, he had momentum, he had youth, and he had determination.

He went.

Pulling himself by the balustrade, Michael soared higher. The spiral energy of the stairwell became a mantra. His feet found a rhythm. Once, he was conscious of a presence. But it was smaller than he was. It shrunk from his urgency. He was up, he was rising. This was his elevation. He had a goal, and he sensed that few here did. Opportunism is no vision. He pulled. He was higher. Height begat height. Elevation gave rise to altitude, altitude confidence and thence arrival. He summited. There were no further stairs. Was he at the roof?

His momentum was precious. He dared not pause. He burst from the door into a passage. Even here, it was lit by the flashes. The last penetrating remnants of them now. He followed the flow of the space. It would lead

somewhere. A reception, a corner office. Bedding. Trash. Food canisters. The scent of shit.

Inhabited.

But unoccupied!

This was the home of survivors. But abandoned. Perhaps briefly. They may have left to hunt. He dared not wait to find out.

He got down to business, fumbling for the cellphone within his jacket. Finding it, he powered it up. He might have only seconds. The solar charge was unreliable at best. But beep, yes. There it came.

He waited the age it took for the home screen to present itself...

“1 new message”

Click.

The same...

“Come to the farm.”

His breath caught with joy. Uncle Oscar was still transmitting!

His thumb moved to the off button. Then he hesitated. Quickly, he typed a reply message. Who knew how these bits of data were travelling, but while he was here, at the highest point in the city, he would try his luck.

“We are many. Maybe 20. Can we come?”

He pressed send.

“Sent.”

There was contact! He must wait. He must get the response.

In the stairwell, he heard the echoes of footsteps. The gasp of heavy breath. They were returning! Michael inched back to the staircase door and found a corner. His eyes never left the screen. Its single bar of charge long gone. Just an empty vase, a block where the charge used to be. The green glow dimmed. The steps on the staircase accelerating. You would expect them to slow. Did they know he was up here? People had seen him. Could they smell him?

They were sprinting up the stairs to find the intruder. He must leave! He could not afford to wait. If he vaulted past them on the stairs in the dark, he might have the momentum to knock them over and gain a lead – one flight of stairs might be enough. If he waited here to be found, he was dead.

He took a last glance.

The phone vibrated in his hand.

“Just you. Come alone”

He tore the door open. A man filled the entire space before him.

...

He would go alone.

Indeed, the one who wants it more will get it.

Michael emerged from the mall as the storm gave its last, and slipped back into the shadows. There was no further question of avoiding fatigue. His chest burned in

pulses as he stumbled into the gutter. He threw himself flat into the rivulets and lay still.

Michael felt his heart charging blood though his ears as he lay his head flat, hugged the land, and let the water wash through him.

They would emerge now, surely.

After tackling the man backward into the stairwell, he had pulled the body into him and ridden the falling weight of it into the chasm. The energy threw two, three of his comrades backwards. The first landing knocked the fight out of the body, and after that he tried to keep the limp form beneath him. From there he was able to steer it into a stairwell post, neck twisted.

He placed his boot on the face and projected into the next flight.

The pursuers gathered themselves, but tripped each other up, while still another chaser managed to dive over the pile of his people.

But Michael's way was clear. Free of the body, he could throw himself down the chasm, grabbing blindly for the rail, swinging his legs through to land with both feet by instinct, at the pivot point at the apex of the landing, absorb the impetus and then project again into the dark. Whether his eyes were open or not, he flew by rusty instruments. He smashed his head against a wall, he turned his ankle over, he wrenched his knee. He almost impaled himself on something.

Still he dived deeper down the shaft, eventually sprawling though the exit door into another splash of lightning light.

Swimming as much as crawling, he found his land legs only at the exit lobby. Just as he needed it, he found the spanner in his hands, and was able to deface the next opponent and follow through into a final escape lunge out onto the street.

Now he felt the burn dying down in his throat. Still no pursuers emerged. Should he go? It was dark enough. He went, holding himself back every step, from breaking into a wild, pounding sprint. Still, he overexerted himself, eventually collapsing, sobbing, outside a complex on Katherine Street, lying prone in a trash pile while he let it all out, the fear, in silent spasms.

Again into the bushes, the gutters, the dark corners, crawling, sprawling, retching cries for mercy, keening in fear, eating his own breath to cling to silence.

“Mommy!” he found himself sobbing at the gate, from nowhere. “Mommy let me in!”

The devices had begun coming back up.

First the lights browned into life. Then the media centres. A television unwatched for weeks. A radio, crackling static, fizzed back into action. Hotplates on stoves long abandoned glowed red when their people

awoke. Alarm sirens could be heard around the city. In a trash-strewn garden, an electric edge trimmer raised itself from the dead and began leopard-crawling across the lawn, lashing the grass into the air. A laptop left on charge fired up the almost forgotten melody of its reboot chords.

Headphones began dribbling tinny music. In a child's bedroom, its occupant long since laid to rest, a nightlight glared, chasing away imaginary demons, when the imagination that conjured them had long been switched off. Vehicles started spontaneously, headlights flashing...

As the word got out, phones were plugged into wall sockets to go back on charge. But a strange thing was happening. The electricity was not just in the mains, it was in the air!

Handsets activated spontaneously. Lightbulbs still in their boxes began to glow. People felt it in the air, in the hair on their arms. It was a type of exhilaration, a sensation of being enveloped by static. The air gave off an audible frequency, a hiss...

The storm had brought it, Michael thought. The storm must have made it happen. The electric storm; he'd never seen one like that. Or whatever had brought the storm, had brought the static.

It moved in waves across the land. A wind of electricity in sheets. It could cause appliances to surge,

switch off or blow out. A man's beard or a woman's hair could emit sparks. Your nose hairs could shock you!

It seemed to make their nerves misfire. Caleb found his muscles reluctant, unresponsive. He could walk and move, but without any force or urgency. He felt a trembling inside himself.

Bonga felt a pattern of intense electrical shocks emanating from within his wound, and radiating out across his shoulder. There was a burning, an itch. The blood ran black and it crackled with a life of its own, then expelled a congealed rope of matter, which crawled across his body then lashed wildly, a snake, a blind slug of animated infection.

There was an energy across the land. But the people were listless. The charge seemed to animate the molecules of the people, but to suppress their initiative, their agency.

The enthusiasm over the charging lapsed into a kind of lethargy, like a heroin nod across the city. The aggression, too, seemed to evaporate.

Caleb dragged himself out of the unit. The driveway was deserted. He made his way to the guard house. He found Jamina and Lulu, supposedly on guard duty. They were prostrate and barely conscious.

"What's going on?"

"We just feel so..."

"Do you also feel weak? I can barely... It's like I can hardly do anything."

“Me too. I can barely stand. I’m going to check on everybody.”

At Bonga’s door, the handle shocked Caleb. He used his sleeve to open it, finding the man on his mattress. Also conscious, but tongue lolling.

“My shoulder... It came... Something came out of my shoulder. The pain is gone. I can almost...”

He raised his arm, stoned.

“I can lift my arm! I’ve got no pain!

Passing Unit 14, Caleb looked in and found Denver on the same couch he was always on. He was staring into the ceiling, head slack. He rolled his eyes across to where Caleb stood at the entrance, but said nothing. A line of saliva left his mouth.

At the unit of Leon and Michael, Caleb found Michael sitting with his phone.

“I’ve got charge. I’ve got messages.”

“And?”

“There’s comms! We can communicate!”

“And how do you feel?”

“How do you mean? I feel fine. A bit tired. I went out last night, but I’m okay.”

“You don’t feel listless? Everybody else in the complex is out for the count. They’re barely conscious. Something to do with the electricity.”

“I know! I feel it in the air. But for me it brings energy. It’s not slowing me down. I feel exhilarated. I want to go out on patrol. Come on, let’s go!”

“Will you take me with you?”

“Me taking you? We can go together!”

The patrol was akin to a boy taking his grandmother for a walk. Caleb lost mojo before they reached the intersection, grabbing for Michael’s arm. As the flesh of their hands touched, a jagged crack of static drove them apart. Caleb had to settle for leaning into Michael with his shoulder, trying to transfer some of his weight...

They took a seat on the pavement near the wrecked intersection. The vehicle carcasses were quiet, desolate, like a village at siesta time. A sporadic buzz emanated from the wrecks, a hum. Now, there was no sign of survivors.

A lone survivor did appear, and approached from the far side of the intersection. He seemed to approach out of curiosity, where previously it would have been malice. Caleb consolidated what little energy he still had. Michael and the survivor walked up to meet each other in the middle of the intersection. They stood two arms’ length apart and eyed each other, like two space travellers encountering one another on an alien planet, not neighbours who may have been at school together.

That was the thing, these were the only people somehow impervious to the static. They stood inside the electric whirlwind, regarding each other with

interest. Even the war and hatred that so obsessed their elders didn't touch them. They were back to being two people, two kids. It was as if the paralysing static fed off the hatred. Without the hatred there was nothing for it to hold on to...

Michael and the survivor reached out to each other. Caleb saw now, he was Sabelo the robot guy. The one with the torch. He seemed so much younger now.

He reached out to Michael. Their fingers touched. They touched one another's hands. Caleb flinched, but no static crack came. There was no repulsion. Their making contact was no violation of the natural balance. It was a handshake between peers.

But around them the litter rose up; the same whirlwind Michael had witnessed outside the mall now wrapped itself around the two youths and spiralled skywards like a cylinder to the heavens. The two of them in the eye.

Caleb drifted out of consciousness. His face on the humming, warm concrete. He just couldn't any longer.

Not only was Michael still conscious, he was stronger. The electricity was charging him. He was becoming...

The fizz, the crack accelerated.

He had what it needed to head out now, and he could sense that no one could stop him. He was stronger. The static slowed down the older people, but with the youth,

it had the opposite effect. Instead of sucking the drive out of him, it was powering him up.

The men and women were too inward to even notice him. The static gave them self-absorption, made them contemplative. They could talk, but were barely able to do anything besides. And talk is cheap.

Action was what the moment needed. And now he was a person of action.

What to do with the power, though, when the youth dividend had made him invincible? He felt he was capable of everything he had been able to do before the event happened, and more.

Ting!

Ting!

Ting!

Ting!

The metal on metal again. But these were now cries for help. Still they were like the rallying sounds, the war cries, the songs of struggle. But they were a memento of the days when they had the power to change things. When their numbers could be knitted together and mean something, when they could inspire fear and awe.

Now, with the static that weakened them, then made them each repel one another, the static that loosened

the bonds of the very molecules inside them, how could they unite?

Ting!

Ting!

Ting!

Ting!

The metallic beats came from the wrecks that littered the highways. From the shacks, the lean-tos against the walls of the underpasses, where survivors clung to life. They were emergency signals, flares, calls for assistance. All they said was, "Here I am. Help me." They came from the older people, once warriors, now weak cyphers for their former passions. Clinging to life, while the youth ran rampant with gay abandon, driven by deeply new priorities.

Life and Growth seemed valid goals to live by, but there were others. What of those who had lives to build, not just assets to protect? When your life has not yet taken shape, when it is still raw, undefined, then its value lies in the future, not the past. Your battle is about clearing a space that you and your cohort can grow into. Not finding and protecting spaces where you can safely continue the way you always have.

He didn't want what he'd always had. Those were steps to becoming. Even this was nothing. Why protect this, the status quo, when it, too, was but a phase, a way station en route to the final destination? Sure, this was

important, not just a milestone, but a brick in a social construction. Every element is important as we build the space we all want to live in. Fundamental.

To dismiss elements is to dismantle the building, demolish, to scorch the earth. To revert to factory settings. Losing your information is only a loss if the information was to your benefit.

Michael surveyed the street from the roof of the guard house. He had been running patrols on his own lately. No one else emerged. The trustees meetings, when they happened, were like a sick bay, half a dozen patients, drooling, slack-jawed, vacant stares. Statements half expressed, trailing off...

Bodily functions were being ignored. Appetites had vanished. They no longer ate, no more bowel movements. No sexual urges. The moisture would transmit the static and shock you from within. They craved dryness. The dryness also encouraged static, but the moisture brought the terrible. storms.

So they just lay and wasted, waited for the inevitable, whatever that would be. Passive, dissolving passengers on a rail spiralling in on itself, down a shaft to god knows what.

At first, he'd tried to feed them, to force some sustenance into them. But there was no vision to support it. What do you sustain someone for? Why do we want to live? Without that, what is the purpose of life and growth? Food, air and water sustain life. Shelter.

But vision too. Purpose. Purpose is the motivation that underpins sustenance. One needs sustenance not just physically, but also logically. What is the argument for eating? Why do we want to live? Do we need to?

That purpose was now gone. Or not obvious, and he lacked the arguments, or the will to argue food into someone's mouth. Like with an elderly spouse who has lost their life partner, there was nothing to say. They simply lay and waited to die. And in the end, he was going to let them.

Maybe the static caused the surrender, maybe the surrender caused the static.

His power here was growing, but he would have to leave, surely. He could not stick around in this, now that external forces were having their way with their bodies. Now that they no longer even belonged to themselves.

His handset was alive in his hands. It glistened with energy, as if it was charging the air around it and not the other way around. It hummed and glowed.

"Are you coming? The farm is running," it said. "We need workers. There is nothing for you there. Come."

He feared speaking to Uncle Oscar. His voice had power. Michael knew he would not be able to negotiate. He would be summoned and he would go. Somewhere, he felt that he must reason it out. He must decide. There was some reason to stay, to salvage. To fight for what the complex, the city, for what it might yet be. Perhaps

leaving would be to abandon it to the static, when the place was surely theirs.

Or was it no longer theirs when they could do nothing productive with it, could not live, could not grow? Had they lost the right to even fight for something they clearly did not care enough about?

With all of their squabbles, were they even fighting for the city? Or for parts of it? They were fighting each other to defend their territory, or to capture the territory of others, so that they could impose themselves on it, use it for their own benefit?

Was there any thought of reviving the city, getting it to work again, so that each complex, each community could express itself and use its assets to define its own life and growth?

Now the self was everything. There was no space left for others. It was a zero sum. Even the land, which seemed to embrace, to encapsulate everything, was something to own, to use, to put to work in your service.

Did they not already serve the land? Were they not here to honour the land, to live according to its needs? To protect, to fight those who would harm their host?

And what was the land, after all? Was the land the relationship that Uncle Oscar had, out in Barkly East, in the fields, farming? Was this the land, here on the street, where mutant car wrecks littered the lanes and people staggered helpless, like powered-down robots, to slump

again and await final decommissioning and ultimate return to the soil?

All of it was the land. How best could he serve the land? He had to find out.

The static was growing, turning in upon itself. It was spiralling into short-circuits that reinforced and then destroyed themselves. Even Michael felt himself carried on waves of energy, blowing in the cosmic wind that now ravaged the city. He had the drive, unlike the grown people, who were now little more than waking corpses. They would blink at you, just when you thought they had finally expired. They would muster the ability to lick the dried sputum from their lips, just as soon as you were convinced their faces had settled into their final death mask.

For him, the static made itself felt as a kind of twitch that erupted spontaneously through his body when he least expected it. A convulsion, with a snap of sparks from the corner of his eyes. A shake of his head, two blinks. A shudder.

Ting!

Ting!

Ting!

Ting!

Still it echoed around the city. The frequency ran through him. Metal on metal. But now he could taste the metallic grind of the friction, the static within his jaw. He felt his very molecules as metal filings, aligning to the energy fields flowing through him. Of course, it was ever thus, but now he felt it more. The energy was the thing, and they were passengers riding it. The best they could do was, in the moment, to adjust themselves to the direction of the energy flows. It was instantaneous adjustment. They were surfers on waves of static. He had learned that the more he surrendered to the energy, the less it took out of him. Like a swimmer pulled out beyond his depth, he was best served to simply go with the current, instead of fighting it. To fight the power of the ocean is to drown within minutes.

The younger ones, they had the feel of it, he sensed, legs for the static in the same way that sailors had sea legs. The grown people had tried to fight it, to impose their will on the static. Like landlubbers on deck, they staggered, they grabbed for the gunwales, they tried to steady themselves, when they could far easier just roll with the swell.

He had the run of the place now. He was like a deckhand on a ship of dying sailors. The mysterious patient who recovers from the plague while all around him succumb. Michael did his rounds, became a solitary patrol of his own. He would follow the boundary wall,

as he had done when his partners were Jamina and Denver. He would stick his head into the units of those closest to life, the younger ones. Jamina and Bonga seemed strongest. In their flat, Jamina cared for Caleb, wiping the sputum from his lips, replacing the tinned peaches in his mouth as they dropped to the floor.

“Come, you must try to eat.”

It was the first intimacy he had seen between them. They had been soldiers. Now, as death loomed, they became a couple.

The older ones were essentially corpses already. He would ransack the supplies of neighbours while they still lived, throwing out a cursory polite request, almost as a formality...

“Do you mind if I have this? Do you want any?”

As if Denver was still in any state to eat. As if he had the appetite to do a year-old can of chicken biryani justice.

Michael promised himself he would do each of these corpses the honour of burning them in their gardens. That was the least that access to their supplies deserved.

The familiarity would have been impertinent in earlier times, but that was the way of now. Michael would enter random units, barely acknowledging the prone form of the occupant – the owner really – drooling, twitching on the tiles. Having got what he wanted, he would leave doors ajar. Still feeding himself

with a fork fished out of a fetid sink, he nodded in the direction of Denver as he strolled through the doorway.

As he left the unit, breaking to the right, towards the courtyard, the static wind caught the door of the storeroom over his shoulder. Or did it?

The door rattled on its hinges.

Again.

Michael stopped.

He went back.

With the half-eaten can of biryani in his hands, he faced the door of the store room. He watched it now. The static was dormant. There was no wind to rattle anything.

But the door rattled. It creaked. The wood cracked from within.

There was something inside the storeroom. Something was alive.

He tried the handle.

Locked.

He kicked at a panel.

Something kicked back!

He dropped the can on the ground and re-entered the unit. Beneath Denver's sink he found a crowbar.

Striding back outside, he wedged the teeth of the implement between the doorframe and the stile. As he applied his weight, the door's dry wood shrieked and the lock surrendered.

Michael grabbed the handle and tore the door open.

In the dark of the store, perhaps a metre square, he made out a pile of paving tiles. Bags of grouting. In the corner, a crumpled sleeping bag, the fumes of faeces... and a head! A pair of sunken eyes staring back at him!

Someone was living in the storeroom! A boy!

No! A girl!

The room was a sealed chamber beneath the stairway to number 17 above. Its walls were raw bricks. He reached in, grabbed the sleeping bag, taking the child by the shoulders. He set his feet and dragged everything out. Clouds of dried grouting coughed out of the room. He threw his hands free of the bedding. The child sprawled onto the brick of the courtyard, face-down, still huddled half inside the sleeping bag. Topless, bony shoulder blade; wild, greasy hair.

He picked up the crowbar. Ready. This one was not dissolving like the others. This was a young one.

It peered over its shoulder up at Michael. Irises straining at the corners of the sockets. Squinting in the daylight.

“W... Wendy?”

She did not speak. Whether by choice or handicap was unclear, but she devoured the remains of the tinned food.

Her appetites were intact.

“How long have you been in there?”

“Was it him? Was it Denver? Did he put you in there?”

She looked into his eyes. The pain around the edges told a long, long story. He gasped. Casting around for a response, he found the crowbar again. Taking it up, he stepped towards the unit. Denver would be easily dispatched, and not a moment before time.

She grabbed at the hem of his jeans, still squinting in the light, she looked up at him from the ground. She shook her head. No.

“Well he’s dying anyway, you know? They’re all dying. We are about the only ones left in here. Come. Come with me. Let’s get away from here.”

She crawled up onto all fours, hands and feet. Her spine arched forward, lupine, She clawed at the bricks, tried and failed to bring herself upright.

He dropped into a squat, gently gathered her up, like a pet injured in a traffic accident. He stood and walked her back toward his unit. She exhaled and slipped from consciousness.

Michael knew that the static would heal her, just as it had kept her alive in that cement box. He laid her out, full length, on his father’s bed. She was its first occupant in weeks.

She gasped at the air, hyperventilating, like an animal giving birth. Feeling the static, surely. He sat beside her and held her hand. It tingled in his palm, phosphorescent around the edges. He braced against

the current. Then he felt it subside. She was one like him. They were comrades in this. They would be together, once she had her strength.

“Hello, my girl. Nice to see you again. It’s been so long.”

It had.

Michael and Wendy had last held hands during the days of Uncle Oscar. When the park was still a place of magic and discovery. When the neighbourhood was still known for offering the kind of safe reassurance expat workers sought out when making a temporary home in a new city.

Swedes, some people were called in those days. Japanese. Indian people. Chinese. Kenyans. The lady from Zambia. Germans, Russians, Turks, Pakistanis and Britons would frequent the park where Michael and Wendy discovered the world.

With Uncle Oscar on his bench, reading a book by McCarthy, they explored the river, the stream that brought sewage-laced water north from Braamfontein. They admired the Egyptian geese, defiantly raising a family amidst the plastic debris that clogged the vlei.

On cardboard offcuts, Wendy and Michael slid down the hill beneath the sightseeing air-balloon. They hacked children’s solutions out of the exercise equipment, clambered across the rotting woodwork of the climbing frames, imperilling their lives on the broken bridges of the jungle gyms. In the sandpit, they

built castles of imaginary permanence at the foot of the steel sliding frame, where thighs squeaked and polyglot children argued over who was most important.

Wendy and Michael had formed a unit by necessity. In an unforgiving park of disrespecting, selfish rivals prone to bullying, a gang, however small, was a bulwark against the depredations of the world. Wendy and Michael became more than just Wendy, or just Michael. And so, they survived each day at the park, and as their confidence grew, they found the courage to return. They retrieved the red ball that the Jewish boy had taken. They got the mother of the Japanese baby boy to say sorry when he stomped their sandcastle. They got to have their turn on the swings, even after the boy Thabo had pushed in.

Or maybe Uncle Oscar ensured they did, putting down his book every now and then and wandering over, asking in a stage whisper, "Is everything alright, Michael, my boy?"

And soon enough it would be.

With Leon's legal work requiring early mornings and late nights, as it gradually put paid to his marriage, Oscar had come up from the farm to support his brother, logistically and emotionally.

In the early mornings, when the day had yet to make up its mind, Oscar and Michael would journey, hand-in-hand down the driveway to Number 14, where Wendy's mom would have her dressed and ready, pigtails

braided, in a faux-fur pink jacket, a tartan skirt and a T-shirt with a picture of a cat.

They would be strapped into the passenger seats of Uncle Oscar's double cab – child seats be damned – and driven the two kilometres to Grayston Montessori. There, Uncle Oscar would chaperone them into the school gates and take his leave with a tender hug for each of them.

The one year, they had both been in the Bunnies. The next year, Michael was in the Leopards and Wendy in the Lions. By primary school, they were regular classmates. The odd year, they might not be in a class, depending on the vagaries of their surnames and where the alphabetical split was inclined to fall.

Then one year, Wendy and her mom went to live somewhere else, and soon after, Uncle Oscar returned to his farm in Barkly. Leon's practice went through peaks and valleys of fortune, enabled him to keep his son schooled and eventually granted him a comfortable retirement.

He became a newspaper letter writer, corresponding with the local daily, warning of impending social collapse. He pointed to the wobbling power infrastructure. Government's seeming inability to pay its own bills. The loss of faith in the country as a construct.

“A country is a manifestation of faith. It is an article of secular superstition. It only exists when the world

believes in it. When people – inside and outside our borders – lose faith in the country, it ceases to exist,” he wrote.

“At their founding, countries are recognised. From that moment on, the country’s fortunes are governed by the confidence that the world feels in their institutions, their currency, their economy. As confidence wanes, the country’s existence becomes less concrete, more tenuous, outsiders become less likely to invest their faith and their funds in its prospects. Insiders, the citizens, face a similar dilemma. Will they commit their lives, their futures, their fortunes, and those of their children to the country and its prospects? Do they believe in the country as it is, or as it might be? Do they believe in it enough to protect what it is, or to fight for what it might be?

“These are the questions our citizens ask themselves every morning when they wake up under our morning sun. As long as they can answer in the affirmative to any of these questions, they will continue to work to keep our nation going, or to make it better. But when they no longer can, then they will withdraw their investment and invest it elsewhere. That investment could be money, years of their lives, faith, their skills and abilities, their contagious enthusiasm. Once it is withdrawn, it is not easily lured back. Today, here, I sense a subsidence of belief, a slow waning of faith in this idea of our country.”

That was when Oscar had begun buying the tinned food.

With the veterans' values now but a memory, Michael had begun venturing out of the complex alone. He had begun mapping the neighbourhood anew. Complexes and settlements were now defined by which ones that had some youthful residents, people with whom he could make meaningful contact.

The intersection had Sabelo, now the de facto leader of the car dwellers. Unlike his elders, he was gentle, with a mischievous smile, one front tooth bigger than its neighbour, and overlapping in a unique fashion.

Sabelo wore dark-blue shorts and carried a bag, collecting as he went, gathering. Michael had found himself gathering too.

The gathering was a sign of an economic revival of sorts. Your supplies, your recovered spoils had value. What gave them value was the recyclers, the resilient, renewing, invincible, force of the city.

Michael realised now that the recyclers had owned the city since the time before. For years they had operated on the periphery, visible but ignored, piloting trolleys piled metres high with recovered material down the city's streets. They ignored as much as they were ignored. Always en route, they constantly had

somewhere better to be than this place, always had a destination. Rumour had it they were heading to Kew Gardens, or Braamfontein Werf. Some said Pageview. Another story said the recycling depot was in Strijdom Park.

Wherever it was, the recyclers were headed there, to convert their gatherings to cash. Theirs had always been a parallel economy, but the change had brought it above the surface.

When manufacturing dies, recycling becomes the economy. The recyclers were uniquely placed to continue their operations once the change came. Their vehicles were manoeuvrable, hardy, and capacious. A handful of supply sorties had shown Michael the value of that. The meagre gatherings they had been able to stuff into a backpack or two had barely sustained them for a week. If they'd had a trolley to load up, they could have tripled that.

The recyclers had taken ownership of their parallel economy and expanded. Their manner served them well. They navigated the city at speed, with defiant strength and entitlement. They belonged nowhere and everywhere. They had been invisible, and they remained so when they needed to be. Part of the fabric of the city.

But now they functioned as linkages, no longer using the infrastructure, but becoming the infrastructure itself. They brought recovered items for exchange,

knowing where everything could be traded. It was no longer about the Pageview depot, or wherever it was. The entire city was now a recycling site. And the recyclers enabled it. Wiry men in balaclavas, weaving between abandoned wrecks, inviting themselves into settlements, economical of speech. Proud, free and unafraid. The city gave them nothing that they did not have to go out and take for themselves.

When it happened, little had changed for them. They had lost almost nothing. If anything, the city had caught up with them. The recyclers had been living the apocalypse before the city even knew it was happening.

By necessity they were young. The static had claimed many of their number, but the younger cohort survived. Stronger, faster, wiser.

In every settlement, they had suppliers. Sabelo represented the survivors of the Grayston intersection. He had taken control of processing the accumulated gatherings from the neighbourhood and from the sorties. All of it for collection and exchange with the recyclers.

Michael was now able to process the meagre proceeds of his personal prospecting through Sabelo.

Their business visits had become social, with the two of them among the few youths on the street. There was something else – their vibrations. When they touched, things happened. The intensity of the contact meant

they could bring themselves to do it only occasionally. But Caleb had witnessed it.

The energy halos that occurred would coalesce and spiral around each other. There was a kind of lightning to it. Instead of earthing, it seemed to project out into the ether. Neither of them understood it, but they were curious.

Caring for Wendy kept Michael inside the complex for two days. By the second evening, she was able to totter across the room with some assistance.

In the meantime, the static was accelerating. Distant thunder was audible almost constantly now, day and night. Sheet lightning ripped the sky. There were tremors, and strange hisses unlike anything he had heard before.

Something was coming to a head. An arrival, a climax, a consummation.

And still Uncle Oscar's texts...

"Are you coming? We need you on the farm!"

He had texted back, "I have found Wendy."

"Bring her. Come to the farm."

"Have you seen the static? The lightning?"

"Come to the farm."

He resolved to nurse Wendy to health and then to attempt the breakout. If they could siphon all of the fuel from the vehicles in the complex, then transport it in drums, they would have enough to support a journey to Barkly, into the mountains.

They would gather all the weapons in the complex and make the attempt. First, they would need to scout a route to the highway. To see whether a breakout was even possible. Perhaps they would complete a short circuit first, to check the state of things. Then the final break. Five hundred kilometres. Six hundred? It was barely possible, but if the numbers in the countryside were shrinking as fast as they were in the city, it could be done. How many survived here? One in ten? One in twenty? That was the youth proportion here.

In the country, was it more? Or fewer? Was the static evident beyond the city limits? The distant lighting implied it was. It might be global.

But Oscar was family. If he could still text, that meant he was capable, alive, perhaps even mobile. The static could not be as strong in the mountains. That meant it was focused by something. Perhaps even purposefully directed. Or perhaps the static emanated from the people, through their consciousness. Where the people were, the static arose. Was that it?

Perhaps the static was aimed at the cities precisely because that was where the people were. Was it an act of war, a weapon? A selective elimination tactic? Was it meant to remove the adults, because whoever, whatever it was, only had use for the youth? Was it still going to come for them, to put them to whatever use it had yet to determine? Were they sitting ducks, waiting in their exposed complexes, feebly defended, clinging to

some long-discredited idea of safety? Perhaps motivated by some residual loyalty, some delusion that they were not always besieged and waiting to be picked off?

Was it all calculated to denude their numbers? A few months of violence and disease to eliminate the weak and the young, and then the static to kill off the old ones, so only those who were young and resilient would make the final cut?

Just when Wendy was becoming able to walk unassisted, Sabelo came to visit. His unique whistle pierced the gate. Michael lifted Wendy onto the roof of the gatehouse to introduce her to their age mate.

Sabelo beamed up at them from the forecourt of the complex, surrounded by the debris that comprised the entrance, the talus slopes of the barricades. Shopping trolleys on their sides, car bumpers, a writing desk, the trellis door from the unit of a tenant long deceased... bookshelves, wheelie bins, a refrigerator, a table with three legs...

He beamed up at them.

"Hi. I am Sabelo."

She looked down at him. The ghost of a smile creased her cheeks. He beamed back up at her.

"This is Wendy," said Michael. "She lives here in the complex."

It was the first of anything like that for months, almost a year now. Friendship, instead of fear. Human

warmth instead of combat. Gifts of welcome in place of aggression.

In the excitement of the moment, Michael decided to lower her down, that being the only way to exit the complex.

“Should we go down? Don’t worry. It’s fine. I’ll show you how.”

With her seated in front of him, he hooked his hands beneath her armpits and lowered her down to where Sabelo could catch her. There was a gentle rustle of static as their bodies made contact.

The two embraced there on the forecourt. Sabelo and Wendy. As if they’d known each other. Age mates together. As the poison they had inherited from their elders began to dissipate, they found themselves like children again, on the playground at the park, introducing themselves.

Then an icy chill blasted up the Michael’s spine. He became aware of someone watching them. Up the road. He turned his left shoulder. The smile fell from his face.

There she stood.

The girl from The Gables.

Her eyes were black with rage. All ideas of childish innocence evaporated in an instant. She raised her right arm and fired a shot. It ricocheted off the barricade. Grabbing Wendy around the shoulder, he dived into the nearby shrubbery, grabbing for his pistol.

There was another crack! A fizzing...

He peered between two bushes to line up his shot.

But there was no one.

She was gone.

Sabelo extricated himself from behind a car door, where he had found cover.

“She disappeared,” said Sabelo.

“She can’t have gone far... She must be hiding here somewhere!”

“No. I was watching her. She disappeared! She was there, and then she was gone! She disappeared.”

“How?”

“I don’t know. It was part of the static. She disappeared into the electricity.”

“She could come back!”

“I know. I can feel the static. She’s still here...”

The air still fizzed with something, swirled around them. Sparks fell where she had stood.

The static wind ignited some sparks on the gates. Michael felt shocks from his pistol. He placed it inside his jacket.

“We need to get back inside. Sabelo, we will see you later.”

“Okay. You two stay safe. If I see anything further, I will let you know.”

“Thanks.”

“Wendy, it was nice to meet you.”

He touched her on her hand as he took his leave. There was a buzz and sparks fell.

She smiled her little smile.

“Can you help us?” Asked Michael.

“Sure”

Sabelo lifted Wendy onto his right shoulder. A halo enveloped them briefly, before Michael had climbed the gate and was able to lift her up onto the gate house.

The appearance of the girl was a turning point. The malice in her eyes spoke of only revenge. They had killed her father, and she knew it. And the static was strong in her. She could only be five, six years old. Whatever was keeping them active, that energy was yet more powerful with her. Perhaps the most powerful.

Michael had not seen one that young who had survived until the static. She might be the youngest, and now, the strongest.

While the static was accelerating, there was no doubt that she was ahead of them. Whatever they tried, she would have the edge. She had the blank-eyed star of a child soldier, like there was no reasoning with her. Just clear goals and focus.

And what reasoning could there be? They had killed her father, slit his throat in his bed while she slept in the next room.

There could be no talking their way out of that one. When death came for them, they would deserve it.

They had to leave. As the static quickened, and assassins began to materialise out of the ether, and the very air became alive with charge that either attacked or embraced, seemingly at random... When that happened, it was time to leave. The theoretical plans he had been mulling for days must now be put into action.

He spent an afternoon gathering the available supplies and packing the most suitable vehicle. The compact SUV of the lady from Unit 17.

With a garden hose, from Unit 2, and a panga to hack open petrol caps, he was able to siphon enough 95-octane fuel to fill all of the five-litre canisters he was able to find. He filled the trunk of the vehicle with these, augmented by the remaining food from the last sortie, and as many reasonably unsoiled garments as he could stomach.

He checked the grown people for a last time. They were like skeletons, ready to ascend. Somehow alive, still, but immobile in puddles of their own sweat, breathing in ragged gasps. Eyes rolled back.

Only Jamina had already been taken. Michael checked on her in the cot she had occupied for herself in the corner of the room she had shared with Caleb. At some stage, they had been expecting a child.

Michael found her dead. Her hand hung through the bars of the cot, as if reaching for Caleb. A metre away, his hand stretched off the edge of his floor mattress. As

she expired, it seemed, he had tried to comfort her. With the last of his energy.

Caleb was beyond communicating. Conscious, but asleep. Or comatose. Perhaps he would awaken later. He had been one of the strongest of the older ones.

Michael shivered and closed the eyes. He covered the corpse.

Wendy was walking now. He took her to visit Denver, where he was awaiting his own death on the floor of the unit they had once shared.

The door was ajar, and the smell of him was detectable from outside already. She entered and stood over him, just short of where his filth had spread. She bent and prodded him in the shoulder.

His eyes burst open, as if from a nightmare, then stared even wider, his mouth pulled into a rictus grin. Yes, she was free. And here she stood over him. She stared into his eyes and felt the pain, as he felt hers.

She let him wallow in her agony. She let it flow into him, every drop, all the weeks, the months, the years of confinement in her own excrement. The special outings, when she had been dragged from the store room in the dead of night, to be used indoors, until he was finished, and she could be returned to her cell.

He knew, and now with his last anaesthetic methods removed from him, he lay defenceless against the emotions he had blunted for so long. As she stood over him, her tears came. The weeping splashed upon his

face, him still grimacing up at her, blinking through her merciless tears.

She sobbed, great cries coming out of her. Her first utterances since Michael had found her. The sounds of her pain. No words had been able to come until that was at last out, and now it rushed out in a flood of anguish and rage and empathy, because he was her father, and she felt his shame. His breath quickened as the emotion tore through him. A high keening sound escaped from his body.

He was capable of nothing else.

They left the unit. The sounds continued, their host now paralysed, by the static, by the fast of weeks, by a total body seizure, by his own shame. They could have extinguished him in a second by standing on his neck. It would have dissolved under their weight. But let him live his last hours like that. Let him die begging for release from the pain of himself.

They found Bonga in the toilet of his unit, sprawled and convulsing, frothing at the mouth. As they checked him, his seizure abated. There was a moment of calm.

“Who is she?” he asked Michael.

“She is Wendy,” he said. “From Denver’s unit. She was there all the time. He had her locked inside the store room.”

“You freed her?” he asked, raising his head from the floor. He smiled and lay back down to rest.

“It’s good. You guys must live. Live and grow, like the man said. Live and grow.”

He asked for water, and they brought him some. Fresh and bottled from the Gables sortie. They put it to his lips and it crackled and hissed, but he swallowed it, then lay down again.

“Are you going to break out?”

“Yeah.”

“Take me with you. Can’t you take me with?”

Then he answered his own question...

“No. Of course not. Ah. It would have been great. I might recover. I might be useful. You never know. Ah... never mind. You must go! The two of you. You go. Break for the highway. Get out there and keep going. You go find Uncle Oscar. Go!”

“Bonga, I want to take you. It’s just... when I look at you here, and I see the others. We need to move, and... the static doesn’t affect us. I don’t understand it either. We were together... It’s so hard, but I just ... I don’t think we can... The static follows the older people... It weakens them... We have to...”

“Go! Go! Don’t worry about me. I’ll hang around here and see what happens. I can feel something big is going to happen soon. I don’t know if it’s sky fairies coming down, or me going up to heaven... Either way... It’s going to be cool!”

He tried to laugh, coughed, coughed again, then lapsed into a smile.

“Go,” he whispered, raising his hand. Michael placed it in his palm. It was like the frail hand of an old lady. Wizened.

“Go. We’ve been lucky to see this. You go, take it forward.”

He smiled. They stood and left. Wendy looked back, to wave hesitantly. Bonga’s eyes had rolled back already. Michael kept on walking. He didn’t see.

To him, Bonga was still alive when he left him.

In the corridor outside, Michael turned back towards Caleb’s unit, stopped, walked a further two steps, paused again, then reversed. There was no sense. He was not going to have another farewell. This was not going to be a final tour of every dying survivor he had fought alongside. Let them die by themselves. Who was he to come and watch their last moments?

Was he somehow entitled to witness someone’s death, someone whose entire life had been lived strong and virile? The man who had kept them from crumbling in fear, must he be remembered as a weak, broken shell, a puddle of fluid, fighting to raise a game smile, trying to delude himself, refusing to die, unwilling to lie down, like a child defying its bedtime curfew, but then succumbing despite everything. Must Michael see that?

Must he die before his eyes being interrogated about his final acts?

No.

Michael resolved to remember Caleb as he had lived, not as he died. Let the static claim him if it must. For him, Caleb would live on in his consciousness. Alive always. A flawed leader, trying to map a route through chaos, trying to eke out some meaning from confusion and anarchy. A man who gave them something to cling to, even if it was a lump of packaging foam in a storm. It was flimsy, it was broken, it was doomed to destruction. But it was something. And he offered it.

They clung to it while they could, they reinforced their pathetic little dwellings, they went on patrols, they armed themselves with garden implements, pepper spray and Tasers. They killed people, robbed and raided, murdered the parents of children... and it gave them power. All of these little rituals, so insignificant and so meaningless eventually, they had value to them. It gave them a cause.

They fought for life and growth, for the illusion of a dream, a vision. That saw them through the terror they should rightfully have felt. Children need stories lest they realise the true horror of the world they will inherit. The stories are designed to be flimsy, to dissolve, but only at the moment when the child becomes an adult and is equipped to face the truth.

When the scales fall from your eyes, and you see things as they are, then, *then* you must really be grown.

Caleb had told them fairytales, whether he knew the truth or not, he certainly knew his stories were fiction. He needed them as much as they did. They needed something to cling to, so he had manufactured it. He had used Leon, the drugstore, the panic-stricken survivors roaming the streets, the messages from Uncle Oscar... he'd stirred all of that into a pot of conjecture and cooked up a version of reality that might serve them, might knit them together into some rag-tag bunch of trustees that could just about defend themselves.

Now that it stood naked for what it was – fiction, Michael wondered whether they were still trustees. Was there anything for them to hold in trust for future generations, if everything they had fought for turned out to be false, made up?

Or was the substance of what they held really of any import? Was it the holding that was the thing? Is it important what our ancient legends contain, what they mean, or is it more important simply that there be legends, regardless; and that the generations be compelled to protect, conserve, to commit them to memory, not to change anything, nor commit any exegetic blasphemies so that the culture might be one with itself, cohesive and historical, of a line, chronological?

Was the real threat of what happened, not so much in what happened, but that it might cause people to break with their history, to lose continuity? When belief in the inherent authenticity of the past trumps commitment to the future, that is one thing. When hope for the future outweighs belief in the past, that is another. But when you become disillusioned about the past, and hopeless about the future, then as a society, you are cut adrift. Better to grab onto anything then, and call it culture. To carve some secular artefacts from found objects – a speech, a charter, a constitution, a court decision, a man. And make them your articles of faith. Because you need religion as much as the superstitious do.

And so, they needed to be trustees, and they must not give the game away. They, more than anyone, knew it was all fiction. There was no foreskin of St Peter inside the box. The fragment was not of the true cross. The freedom fighter was but a fallible man, prone to fear, bigotry and abuse of his family.

That secret is what they held in trust. That fact that all is exactly as it seems. All is mundane. The specific is general. The gods are like us. Fallible, imperfect, but capable of greatness, given the right vote of confidence. Heroic in the most favourable light. Handsome during the golden hour.

And that fake iconography was the vote of confidence that inspired the very best of everybody. Our heroes were racists. Our liberators were paedophiles. The most

inspirational were unrequited misogynists. But the best of them might inspire the best in others, others who are also imperfect.

In that sense, Michael realised, we are all trustees of our own better angels. The one bright spark of beauty that flickers inside us, assailed on all sides by our darkest, most evil impulses, *that* we must hold in trust. We must nurture and cherish that spark, that tiny light. It comes down to us from somewhere, just as do our most savage instincts. But we are trustees of the light of goodness inside us. We must show that to our fellow survivors, that we might inspire them to greatness.

It might be hypocrisy; it might be humanity. We are all imperfect, but capable of greatness – we seldom pretend to be anything else. That greatness we hold in trust, and we must nurture and protect it until we pass it on.

What Caleb had taught, he would hold in trust. That ability to nurture faith in the future, to build hope out of hopelessness. To inspire confidence when all one feels is fear.

And he would hold in trust his memory of brave, strong Caleb. Caleb the Sure. He would strive to inspire similarly, with whatever he had. His abilities were different, but he had been taught by Caleb, and what was teaching, if not the giving in trust of knowledge, *logos*, the word.

As they climbed inside the vehicle, Michael clipped the belt around his passenger. She was intrigued by the process; it was familiar but new.

“Safety first,” he found himself saying, as Leon had before him. And Uncle Oscar. It must be a family thing.

Then he reversed into the courtyard and pointed the nose of the SUV at the barricaded gate. The bullbar would have to prove itself. If they could force their way through here, they might make it through whatever obstacles the highway put in their path.

The breakout began right here.

And not a moment too soon. For as he turned the ignition, a field of static enveloped the vehicle. Finding the gears, delicately sensing the clutch like a faun found its feet in the spring, he lurched the vehicle down the drive. The gear lever was alive with charge! Electricity arced across the windscreen. Beyond, the steel turrets of the security gate glowed green. The electric fence, till now a forgotten relic of more innocent times, lit up like Christmas lights. The glow of the metal seemed to reduce the atmospheric light, as if there was only so much energy to go around.

Centred in the driveway, he took a moment to rev the engine and to choose his spot. He identified a hole between an upright chaise longue and a pile of oil heaters and floored the accelerator.

“Get down,” he said. “Get your head down. We’re going through.”

The traction control bit and they fired like a bullet into the gap. The bullbar smashed the lounge into splinters, the fins of the oil heaters screamed across the side of the SUV, ropes of sparks snaking across the windows. The debris of the barricade vaulted them into the gate, the rear wheels roared as they lifted off. The vehicle pounced on the gate like a leopard on its prey. The gate snapped off its rails and collapsed, the SUV fishtailing into the street.

Wendy pulled herself upright and wailed in joy...

“Woooooaaah!”

“Awesome, right?”

“Ha, ha!”

He was pointed at the intersection. It was no thing to just slip the car into second. He did so, and hit the gas. But then...

They both lurched forward in their seatbelts. The car would not move! Something was holding them back!

He looked back through the rear window.

The child!

The little girl.

She was directing a ray of static at the car. She had the SUV impaled on a shaft of light. Bolts of lightning scattered like striations across the sky everywhere. The very sun seemed to be flashing in and out.

In a climactic burst, a pulse of energy surged into the vehicle and knocked out all the systems. The engine died, the column of light dissipated and they trundled to a halt against the kerb.

“Wait here,” he said.

She ignored him and they both climbed out of the vehicle.

The girl stood arms akimbo across the lane divider, staring them down. Her fingers crackled with static as she flexed, deciding.

Michael took a step, and she raised her hand, palm down. He froze.

Wendy advanced a single step. The girl lowered her hand. Her black-eyed glare softened one click. The anger in her halo of sparks seemed to flicker off, inviting her in. Wendy advanced further.

Two steps.

Pause.

She raised both her hands in peace. She looped around, skirting the space between them, approaching in a crescent route that brought her in from the side.

Two metres off, she stopped again. Her eloquence would not lie in words. She spoke in gestures.

I'm not dangerous, the gestures said. I come gently. I am a friend. We are together. We are children. I am older, but I am like you. You are not alone. We are not many left now. We have been left this to live through. It is not of our making. But it is our inheritance. The ones who came before have left it to us. Their way was the way of isolation, separating us into camps, factions, lonely individuals. The way of people alone amongst the millions. Then we were many, too many. We had to cut ourselves off to find peace inside ourselves. Now we can find peace together. We can comfort one another; we can build strength. We must grow together and not at each other's expense. We can build. The fighting, the fear, the anger. It was the death of the old ways. The static is friction, the violence of contact. We have been repelling each other. Let's let each other in. Come with us. This place is no longer for us. Come.

Wendy turned back towards the car, her hand hanging by her side. The child took her hand, and together they walked back to the vehicle. There was static, but not between them. The electricity formed an aura around them, as if they were one thing. Together.

Their steps were fire. There were waves of heat in their wake. They shimmered.

Michael raised his hand in hesitant greeting. The child eyed him evenly.

He returned to the vehicle and tried the ignition. The car started.

Wendy and the child climbed into the back seat. Instantly, the electronics burst back into life.

Just then, Sabelo appeared, standing at the window, a black bag over his shoulder. He smiled again. Michael nodded in greeting.

“I see you are leaving.”

“It’s time.”

“Where are you going?”

“We’ll see. Get in.”

“Let’s go.”

Sabelo climbed inside the vehicle. Michael eased the car forward, toward the wrecked intersection at walking speed. The wrecks now lay abandoned, a trash pile, an ashy fireplace. From the upturned chassis of a wreck, the boot of a person flickering their last twitched a little bit... Still, there were pathways between the wrecks. The pattern of settlement replicates itself at every scale.

There were youth to be seen. Teens, children, with static about them. Sparks pouring off them. Just before the highway, a group of them stopped the vehicle at an improvised roadblock and peered inside. More out of curiosity than fear, or malice. Then they stood back and watched them pass. Soon, after four or five of these stops, Sabelo seated himself upon the bullbar at the front of the vehicle, his legs dangling off the front. That’s how slowly they moved.

They realised they needed to show themselves, to demonstrate their status. They were youth survivors, not people from before. They were of the future, not the past. They could pass. They carried hope in their hearts, not fear.

Sabelo acquired a steel bar from a wreck along the way. Part of a car jack. Each time they approached a camp, he would beat the rhythm on the bulbar. The rhythm of their country.

Ting!

Ting!

Ting!

Ting!

They announced themselves from a distance. There was no point in approaching with stealth. They were not conducting a raid. They said, here we are, see us. We are passing through. Hi, hello.

Sometimes the reply came across the landscape, from camps in the parking lots of buildings, forecourts of petrol stations, groups of huddled shacks on the bridges they passed beneath.

Ting!

Ting!

Ting!

Ting!

Like some kind of code, a signal, it carried a visceral intelligence of tone. It said everything and nothing. It was itself alone. There was no subtext, no deep meaning. The rhythm was the rhythm of steel upon steel. It said, "We have metal, we have implements, we have limbs, we have rhythm. We announce ourselves. We are unafraid. We hear you, we are like you."

Like space transmissions between alien races, the commonality of tools, tone and rhythm was all they had, across that static-ridden cityscape. The medium was the message. It was the method.

They reached the onramp to the main highway by the afternoon. Two fortresses guarded the flyover. Rifles were visible on the ramparts. But the population had been destroyed. There was no one to man the forts, and those who might, had no inclination to do it.

They maintained speed, proceeding like a party that expected to be granted passage because they posed no threat. Sabelo raised his hand, palm open. He waved himself through. And the youth of the road waved back.

And so it continued. They made exactly twenty kilometres on the first day. The pace of a person walking. They made camp beneath a flyover on the southern side of the city. They decided to pause before they reached a mall that stood between them and the countryside. They would negotiate that in the morning.

The static was constant. They left a wake of skittering sparks on the tarmac. The compression at the front of the vehicle caused a glow that enveloped Sabelo on the bonnet. A transmission tower they passed fired taut, intermittent beams of cyan intensity into the sky, like the speech between planets. Like it was reporting back.

Wendy and the child had slept in the back seat for most of the journey, exhausted from some psychic exertion that the boys could only approximate.

At the onset of evening, they pulled the vehicle off the road into a small drainage ravine, and dragged some nearby wreckage in to act as camouflage and to delineate a campsite.

They had encountered no vehicle traffic. The people in the camps they found seemed sedentary, recalibrating as the grown people and their ways faded from the landscape. There was no sense of mission about them. The settlements were transforming after the time before, but organically, innocently, with no premeditation or prejudice. They must also have lived through the upheavals of the change. The bandits, the fear, the raids. The fearful patrols, then the coming of the static and the rise of the youth.

Perhaps, like all of history, their stories were the same but unique. They would live the history that was most apt to them. They lived in their environment, as they had done. They held their heritage in trust.

It was they, Michael, Wendy, Sabelo and the child, who were the anomalies. They were the ones interrupting the line of descent, violating the trust of their environment. The causal connection of story: The place creates the characters. The characters create the story. They defied it. They said, with their actions, their exodus, that theirs was not a story of place, but of people. They would make themselves by movement, not settlement. Their change would not be wrought upon their environment, but upon themselves.

At least at this phase of their life, their growth.

But still. At night, when their travelling was done, they become sedentary people, as they had ever been. They brought their solitary convoy to a halt and they camped, they made a community of place. Here they would stop. There they would make fire. There they would relieve themselves. They would sleep thus, with these people keeping guard. The human pattern was one of settlement upon the land. It had to be. It was the way of existence. You could move, but it would be a movement of many tiny, brief settlements. What defined you was simply the duration of your settlement, and your mode of survival while there.

That was the thing.

They had no mode of survival. They had barely had one before, and who knew what they would have eventually. For now, they were exposed, living off the

gatherings they had been able to scratch together before they left.

The mall parking lot was a field of car dwellings with a handful of the trash fires that meant life.

Ting!

Ting!

Ting!

Ting!

It was a kind of doorbell at the entrance to the mall parking lot. An answering beat came from a minibus taxi near what had once been a pay station. They rolled up in the SUV. They exited the vehicle.

A group of four teens stood up from their fire. Two boys, two girls. The one boy had a swollen head, with an angry red birthmark that covered the left half of his face.

“Who goes there?”

He was a tall, skinny youth, in a hoodie. About the age of Wendy and Michael. In his right hand, he held a filthy spatula that he had been using to stir a pot of food on the fire.

“Passing through,” said Michael.

“From where?”

“Sandton”

"Oh, Sandton. Heading where?"

"The countryside."

"Why leaving Sandton?"

"Nothing left there. Previous people dying. Bad static. No food."

"So you come to take our food?"

"No, just passing through. We came to greet."

"Okay, Sandton. You've greeted us,"

This was a younger girl, maybe 16.

"You've greeted us. Now you can be on your way."

"We need water. We thought we would visit the mall to see what we can find there."

"No water here," said the child with the big head. "No water in the mall."

"Can we visit?" asked Michael. "See what we can find?"

"You will find only dead people," said the tall boy.

"The older ones lived in there, and that's where they died when the crackling got them."

"The static? Is it bad here? Who has it taken?"

"The ones who are 18 and older. The older you are, the worse it gets you. No more grown-ups here. Only us."

"Can we go and look?"

"Don't you have malls in Sandton? Why must you come to ours?"

"Like I said, we're just passing through. We are not from Sandton any longer."

"Ha! You come from Sandton to tell us you're not from Sandton!"

It was the older girl.

“Sandton people coming here to the South to shop!” she said to the older boy. “Suddenly the South is interesting for them! How do you like it in the South?”

There was an aggression, and a pride of place in her attitude. She stood at an angle, but now she squared up her shoulders.

“It must suck in Sandton if you have to come here now. What do you say? Does Sandton suck?”

“Yes,” said Michael. “Sandton sucks now.”

“Ha!” she coughed a bitter laugh, turning to the boy with the big head. “You hear that? He says Sandton sucks! How badly does it suck?”

“Fights. No food. Bad static. No old people. No water.”

“So, would you say, the South is better than Sandton?”

“It looks better,” said Michael. He was doing all the talking, but Sabelo had come up on his shoulder. They tightened their formation.

“It might be better. Less static here. We just need to scout for water and food. We’ll gather what we can and move on.”

The other group also stood now. The tall one spoke on their behalf.

“No gathering in this mall. It’s ours. We live here. You can’t come gather at other people’s mall. Go to your own mall.”

For the first time, static prickled around the boy’s head. This set off the others. The boy with the big head

waved his fingers and shards of electricity danced between them. A girl who had been silent till now shook her head.

“No. Not allowed.”

She stretched her hands out in front of her body so that her palms faced them. Her hands glowed for a second, and then a bolt of light shot out from them and struck Michael in the chest. He flew back a metre and landed on his buttocks.

Immediately, the girl Wendy rushed to his aid.

“I’m okay!”

The girl from the Gables made two fists and mimed raining blows on the opposing gang. From a distance of five paces, the energy she summoned threw them all off their feet. They landed in showers of sparks and lay stunned. Her fists glowed. She held her stance.

The youngest from the other gang stood quickly, but before she could respond, more of the girl’s waves knocked her back.

“Back to the car!”

They retreated to the SUV. As they backed up, Sabelo grabbed a nearby shopping trolley and pushed it across the gap. It collided with Tall Boy and Big Head as they were getting to their feet. It bounced into the two girls and the whole gang was floored. By now Michael had started the car and the others were on board.

“Sabelo!”

He screeched past with the rear passenger door open and Sabelo was able to dive in, landing across Wendy's lap. With a wave, the girl from the Gables laid down a blast of covering fire that sparkled off the frame of the trolley. Then they were away, weaving past a wreck, back towards the highway. Michael felt a wave of turbulence that might have been a blast fired at them. He rode it out and they continued.

The girl spoke for the first time.

"Nasty people."

"Ha! No kidding," said Michael. "Those were definitely nasty people. But look at you! You saved us with that energy of yours. You are our hero."

"Sure. Super power!" said Sabelo. "You were our strength today."

"Good to hear your voice," said Wendy, leaning forward and putting her arms around the girl. "What is your name?"

"Lerato."

The mall marked the end of the city, and the end of any idea of safe passage in the arms of their age mates.

The mall gang jealously guarded their identity of place. Location was central to their understanding of themselves, as well as their understanding of others. To

the mall gang, they were Sandton, even if they had left Sandton.

They had left Sandton exactly because the place horrified them. They no longer belonged there, if they ever had. Yet here, on the other side of the city, their provenance defined them.

And it would remain thus. At every stop, the sedentary gangs would demand to know where from, to categorise, and thus to other. Perhaps to gain understanding, but also to prevent understanding. When you belong somewhere else, you don't belong here.

If I cannot place you within my own set of definitions and prejudices, I am at sea, I must relate to you anew. If I do not categorise you, we stand naked before each other like children on a playground, unarmed with preconceptions. Unprotected. But also strengthened. When we are no longer chained to our heritage, we are truly here, now, and relating. But that naked vulnerability takes courage to negotiate, and only the bravest dare to live it.

Generalisations arise because they have been useful. Their bigotry is concealed because it need not be expressed.

“Where from?”

“Sandton.”

There need be no further dialogue. The prejudice can simmer unaided. The question itself demands

conformity to the categorisation impulse. Define yourself by place, it says. And if not by place then by pastime, by community, by trade. By culture. Where from? What do you do? What is your name? That is a rare name. Where is it from? What does it mean? What culture? Are your parents of that culture? So where are you from? Where did you grow up? And your parents? And their parents? And their parents' parents?

And what do you have in common with them, whom you never met, from so far away in time and place? How much of what they left in trust for you, have you actually received? How much has gone missing, been misinterpreted, forgotten, betrayed, updated? And how much of what you have received from the trustees of your culture have you rejected despite all that was done to preserve it for you?

Do your feelings about your inheritance matter? Are you just a cypher for the line of descent you occupy? Are you the kind of person you are, or are you the kind of person you were meant to be, is your nature envisaged, or lived? Are you defined by your ancestors or your contemporaries? Were your ancestors defined by their contemporaries? Are they now? Are your contemporaries defined by their ancestors, or by you?

Is your responsibility to your ancestors or is it to your contemporaries? Or to the essence of what has been held in trust for you, that you might hand it down intact to your own descendants?

Like myth and legend, song, rhyme and fairytale, must what is held in trust be faithfully preserved and reproduced, or is there a duty of processing, of maintenance, contemporising? Is it sacrilege to update the holy texts? Or is it sacrilegious not to? In applying the culture that has been held in trust for us to our contemporary situation, do we create a parallel narrative, or do we process the narrative itself? Does understanding the knowledge, change the knowledge? Is the lesson the lesson, or is it the understanding that is the lesson?

For the travellers, was there any hope of making people understand that they did not represent what they had left behind? Or was it them that needed to understand that they did in fact represent their place of origin? Was their best understanding of themselves to be had through the eyes of others?

Are you what you think you are, or what others think you are?

Are others what you think they are, or what they themselves believe themselves to be?

Is there a single mad person who actually believes themselves mad? Or is the mad person's understanding of themselves irrelevant? Perhaps the madness itself lies in the person's inability to function in concert with those around them. Their contemporaries do in fact know them better than they know themselves.

And those of us who are not mad? Do we know ourselves better, or any differently? Our internal echo chamber, our unanimous, defined and categorical understanding of ourselves... does that serve us?

Are we what we think we are, or what others understand us to be? Our self-understanding is but a single opinion. If those around us differ in their assessment of our nature, are they not better placed? Indeed, they are in the majority!

So, were they indeed still emissaries, the very essence of Sandton, even while no one any longer knew what Sandton was? Did they bring Sandton with them, in their ways, their attitude and their personalities? Would the culture that begat them simply come through in their nature, and were they powerless to mediate it?

Were they running into the depths of the countryside to escape the city, but bringing the city with them in their ways, their culture and their nature?

And would the city that was within them eventually kill them the way it had killed their parents? Was that what it was? Was that the static?

Was it a pandemic, a virus that had already infected them?

No, their actions said.

NO!

We are not our heritage! We make ourselves afresh. We leave behind what we can. What we cannot shed, we bring with us. We venture forth towards the new. New

place, new time, new people. We reject what has been entrusted to us. We reject it!

What we have been entrusted with, the culture, the ways and the attitudes, have not served us. They have failed. They limit and handicap us. As a lens through which to observe the world, they obscure, misrepresent and deceive.

The static claimed our elders. It is our naïve youth that has saved us. Life is not the same as growth. Growth is what killed the others. Their old ways cost them their lives.

When the society collapses, one cannot rebuild it in its own image, so that it can fail again. It must be rejected. The destruction must be embraced, supported, accelerated. Let the collapse continue! Viva the collapse. Let us die that we might live, differently.

Sentiment and nostalgia were the enemies. They were what kept us chained to the past, the values of our ancestors and what they handed us in trust. The poisoned inheritance that led to the collapse of our society, our cities, our systems and the death of our people.

This is what their actions said, their journey, their exodus. Theirs was a journey away from the past. A breakout into the future.

The settlements to the south of the city were by turns broken, desperate and combative, like the people of their times.

When there came no response to their rhythms, they avoided stopping. Even this, they did only when necessary. They had chosen to load the vehicle with fuel, but this left them exposed when it came to water. They tried to increase speed to reduce travel time and obviate the constant need for water searches.

The highway was open and they managed to travel a couple of hundred kilometres. The first toll plaza they encountered was a burnt-out shell, but the road was intact, and they could navigate around the debris. The second toll plaza had been the scene of a battle. Corpses lay rotting on the road, and the road was blocked right across with the wrecks of two trucks, burned and on their sides.

Michael navigated the SUV to the side of the highway, looking to find a way around the blockade. Perhaps, if they could cut the fence, they might find a route through the bush.

They pulled over into a culvert and exited the vehicle to scout the terrain on foot. They moved together, and at first there seemed to be no one else around. The fence was a hundred metres from the road. Michael got to work on the wires with a set of pliers he had inherited.

In a few minutes, the work was done, and they returned to the vehicle to begin the job of piloting it through the scorched veld.

As the four of them stood around the SUV, they heard a new sound – the hiss and roar of another vehicle approaching. The first of the journey.

It was another SUV, silver like theirs, but bigger. A Land Cruiser.

The second car arrived at speed, then slowed and followed the same path they had. It paused at the blockaded toll booths, then veered right and drove to the roadside, where it stopped and two occupants climbed out. Two boys in skinny jeans and baseball caps. They gave acknowledging nods and walked up to the group.

“Where from?”

“Sandton.”

“Ah. We from Morningside. Sharp.”

The one in the red cap reached out a hand. Michael reciprocated, out of some long-forgotten instinct. The contact brought a sharp crack of electricity, which they both stoically absorbed.

“Sandton, hey? It’s a mess that side, hey. Don’t blame you guys for getting out. Did you see that Rivonia intersection? We were in a firefight that side. Killed five of those bastards. The place is a hell zone. Where you breaking for?”

“Countryside... We’re trying to see if there are still people on the farms.”

“Not heading for the coast? Did you hear there’s people setting something up at the coast? Cape Town side. Educated people. Everyone’s going there. It’s your only chance. We must drive together. The savages will kill you if they get the chance. Drive in convoy. We both basically from Sandton. Where did you go to school? Don’t I know you from school? Did you go to Morningside High?”

Michael ignored the query and responded with a blank statement.

“We’re going through the fence here.”

“Cool, cool. We’ll follow you. I’m just going to check the toll booths for savages. You can’t take any chances. The guys will kill you. It’s us or them. Us or them.”

The second guy, in a grey logo cap, nodded again and followed Red Cap back towards the blockaded toll booths. The crew climbed into the vehicle as soon as their backs were turned, except for Sabelo, who walked ahead of the car, guiding them through the veld.

Across the distance, they heard the sound of gunshots. Two! Three! They looked back to see the two boys coming out of a toll booth. Both carried pistols. They entered the next booth. Another two shots!

The next booth. Three shots!

They emerged again, firearms in hand, and strode back to their vehicle.

“Five of the bastards!” Red Cap shouted across to them. “They could have come after us at any time. Are you guys armed? You can’t be too careful, you know. You gotta check every settlement. That mall as you get out of town was crawling with them. We must have taken care of ten of them at that place. How many do you think? Ten? Twelve? Imagine if they’d come after us!”

The two started their vehicle and followed the first SUV, Sabelo leading the way. He lashed at the grass, aiming to expose any rocks or holes. One small watercourse was only visible from above, and required a path adjustment.

The boys behind showed no patience, and overtook the lead vehicle at pace, accelerating past, surging into the air and then dropping violently into the donga with an explosive crash, so that the car came to rest on its chassis, with the front two wheels spinning.

The Sandton foursome were able to negotiate the gully by following its course to where it emerged back by the fence. They had rounded the blockaded toll plaza.

“Ay!”

The two from the Land Cruiser whistled. Ignoring them, Sabelo set himself to work clipping through the second fence.

“Ay, guys! We gonna need a tow to get out of this one. We got a rope. We just need to hook it up to your towbar. Just reverse back this side quickly.”

Sabelo had his work done, and without a word being exchanged in response to the occupants of the other vehicle, or his own fellow travellers, he hopped back inside the car. Michael eased their car back onto the highway and accelerated back onto the road. He cast not a backward glance at their marooned former neighbours from Morningside.

“They’re not going to be happy,” smiled Sabelo.

Michael was expressionless.

“Killers. Let them shoot their way out of there.”

From the toll plaza south, the highway offered open and easy driving. They took the gauge up to 60, which was as fast as they were comfortable travelling under the conditions. The only vehicles they passed were abandoned cars at the roadside. Some burned out. Others just dusty, perhaps out of gas, relics of earlier breakouts gone wrong. Before the city of Bloemfontein, they pulled off under a bridge to refuel.

Well off the tarmac, they were not easily visible from the road. As they came to a halt, they heard the sound of a car at high speed and the Morningside SUV came pelting past. The vehicle was out of sight within a minute. They had not been spotted, purely by dumb luck.

But now Morningside was ahead of them.

Once they had refuelled, they got back on the road at their former pace, but the road now held new terrors.

Danger was no longer a possibility that might lie somewhere in front of them. It was a definite. They had just seen it come barrelling past. Somewhere down the road, Morningside and his mate lay in wait.

Michael cast his mind back to his school days. Did he recognise the boy in the red cap? Possibly. From shopping mall Saturdays, or school socials, or the sports field. The guy had seemed sure that they knew one another.

They will have shared space together, if not classrooms. In some ways they were the same, thought Michael. Morningside was Sandton, essentially. Those guys are me, in another mode, he thought.

They are a product of the same culture that created me. I have inherited the same values that made them kill savages for sport. What stops me from doing it? Or was I in fact doing it, when I killed the father of Lerato because he might have stopped us from stealing his supplies?

Even killing can be justified if it's for the greater good, or if the victim is an enemy. Then they start to lose their humanity, and with it their right to life. But how do people become enemies? Our neighbours? How did my neighbour become my adversary?

How is it that one day we share taxi rides and stand side by side, and the next, I can take your life? What changed?

Was it fear that drove me to do it? It certainly wasn't understanding. I have no idea what is happening to this world. All I know is we were afraid. We banded together in our little complex, for life and growth, and then we began to kill and maim in the name of self-defence and solidarity.

Then when the static came for everybody, there was no one left to make peace with. The few of us who remained were just the last ones standing, brought together by mutual desperation, still. We barely know each other. Self-interest made us kill one another, and now it's self-interest that has us huddled together and running for our lives to no one knows where.

When it is once again in our selfish interests, will we again turn on each other? All of us are so damaged, so wounded, that self-care is the only good deed we are capable of. When we help others, it is only incidentally, because their needs align with ours. Is that even charity? Is that caring? Love?

Or narcissism? Are we together, or are we simply fellow travellers, lonely individuals sharing transport? Banding together because it keeps us safer as individuals. Can we really be a community when selflessness has ceased to exist, when no value inheres in sublimating the self before the interests of your neighbours, your friends, your family, such as it is?

Why and how did he come to have these companions? Wendy because she had been

rediscovered, and with her, a part of his former self had been resurrected. She brought his childhood back to life within him.

Sabelo because they were one synergistic, they fit like Lego. What he could do, Sabelo could not, and what Sabelo provided he, Michael, could never do. Strength of purpose, courage, physical ability.

And Lerato, the girl. Because of her awesome power, her ability to channel the static like a conduit. Someone like that could not be your adversary. She had to be co-opted.

Those were the cynical, selfish underpinnings of their ostensible team of friends. Of course, they all offered each other companionship and safety in numbers. But all groups did that. The real reasons for affiliating are selfish first.

Disaffiliating too, would happen when that was in their individual interests. When belonging was no longer worth their while.

This was the uneasy alliance that headed south through Bloemfontein, nursing the gas pedal, lest they catch up to their furious nemesis up ahead. Morningside in the silver Land Cruiser.

The only other gang to have left the city.

Why only them? Why only their two crews from Sandton? Was it outrageous luck alone that had helped them survive the static; some vagaries of age and youthfulness? That he was old enough to drive, but

young enough for his molecules to survive being flash fried by cosmic pulses of energy?

But still, there were other teenagers with drivers' licences. Why were they not on the highway, breaking for the coast, or the country?

For now, he would pretend it was only them two, the two silver SUVs of Sandtonites. A useful lie to keep life's enormity manageable.

He, Michael, and the boy called Morningside. They were the ones breaking for the border, skipping town. Getting the hell out of Dodge. Giving up on the town that had gone to the dogs.

But breaking for something better. Whether it be the mythical coastal refuge, or Uncle Oscar's mountain idyll, they were inspired by hope, as much as chased by terror. And unlike others with the opportunity, their hope for better would trump their fear of the unknown.

When hope trumps fear, then things start to happen.

On instinct, Michael chose a new route. He got off the highway as soon as possible. The burnt-out barricades at every toll plaza were disturbing enough. But now their group were coming across executed corpses at the roadside. Youth, teens, children. Not the expired elders. These were people freshly killed. Perhaps the work of Morningside and his sidekick.

It would be but a few kilometres before Morningside and associate worked out that the former neighbours they were no doubt hunting, were behind them, and not further ahead down the highway. When that realisation struck, it would be mere minutes. And then they would fight.

But still the blockades. One at a petrol station. One in the gutted, shot-up trucker stop of Winburg, again made up of a couple of trucks pulled across the highway and set ablaze. This one must have burned long and hard a few weeks ago already – a charred fuel tanker, a lifeless matte grey, rusting. They ventured into the side streets of the town, navigating a way around the blockade.

Who blocks a road, Michael wondered, as he gave Sabelo his first driving lesson. The car jerked through an intersection on a dead suburban street. What is the message of a blockade?

Is a blockade an act of destruction, or an act of annexation, of laying claim to something that would previously exclude you?

It makes you ask, what is a road? A road would be a connection, but also an escape, a diversion, a bypass, a way of avoiding the real encounters that a true human journey requires. There is the road of speed, of convenience, of incidental, aloof transience. And then there is the road of engagement, of continual arrival; the road of constant, eternal destinations, revealing

itself, a revolving cast of acquaintances and experiences, presented for the traveller's education and edification.

The nature of the road is in the mind of the traveller. His approach to the road determines how it will be. There is no objective road, only the road you experience, and as the traveller, you make the road. You drive or you stop; and if you stop, for what and for how long? With what purpose?

The road itself is a series of ends, of finishes, just as every town, every onramp is a beginning. The people we encounter are at the start, the middle, the end of their journeys, and we share a stretch with them. They are travelling with momentum, like us, or they are residents at a roadside village where we pull in to ask about water and to relieve ourselves, perhaps to gather some findings.

Many of our fellow travellers are on their outward journey, into a world fresh, new and inviting, others are returning home. They have been and they have seen. They have travelled this road already. All of this they have seen before. It is no longer new to them, and they move with grumpy impatience. No more childlike curiosity; no surprised joy. No more the thrill of unfolding adventure.

The outward journey is childhood, the return road is middle age. Arrival home is death. The halfway destination is... Does life ever provide a halfway destination? Or if it does, do we ever realise when we

are there? Is life not only a journey, but a circular one, a round trip homewards? But the destination is kept a secret from us, the great punchline, until, at our final arrival, we realise that the secret place we were bound was the very one we left all those years ago, and that what we were seeking after all, was what we left behind?

For some of us, it will be sweet nostalgia, for others bitter disappointment. The realisation that this, after all, is all there is. That despite all the travel, the striving, the effort, we could not transcend our origins. That we were doomed to return to our source. The river returns to the sea.

Michael felt the curiosity and knew, he had not yet turned for home. What lay ahead still fascinated him. He must know it. That, after all was why he had left. Not because he rejected his culture. Not just that, but he rejected the confines of it. He refused to accept the four walls of the complex as the finite borders of his world. He would use his agency to expand his world, actively.

And every kilometre travelled was a further mapping of his world, as it was for all of them. They knew enough to know that what the world brought them in the Sandton of death and decay was not becoming more. That was not growth. It was diminishing. They would be reduced by the experiences that came their way in that place, that time.

This, even if this journey also brought death for all of them, this was a trip of living. The life of hope, naïve curiosity and learning. Not fearful consolidation. Perhaps that would come later.

He worked the clutch for Sabelo and directed his gear change.

“There, there. Just to the right and down. Fourth. Press the gas as you feel the gears engage. There you go.”

He felt the momentum press them back into their seats, he sensed the crackle of the static through the gear lever, and for the first time, he felt something else, a hint he had been waiting for.

Fatigue.

He was tired. It might be the driving, but it was something else. Sabelo giggled and shrieked through the nerves at the novelty of his first drive, and Michael smiled, reliving his maiden voyage. In the back, the girls egged them on, feeling Sabelo’s confidence grow, channelling the adrenalin.

But inside all of that, he felt the static take hold of his heart. He felt himself turning for home. His smile grew a sadness within it. The eyes turned dark. They still felt the joy, but it was a sad joy. One that would not last forever. He kept it in, and forced himself to laugh louder, to live the moment with even greater intensity! He must live it while he can, but he knew. He had seen this. The static would claim him like it had claimed Bonga, like it had taken Jamina, one way or another, and like it had no

doubt accounted for Caleb in their sparse room at the complex.

He must get them to the farm while he was still able. Another day, two days, he would be fine. Then the listlessness would set in. He would lose enthusiasm, then ability, and finally life.

That night, on the outskirts of Smithfield, where they found shelter in a cutting a few kilometres off the road, he mentioned it to Sabelo. They walked away from the fire, briefly. To throw stones at the moon, to walk in slow circles, kicking the dust, feeling their limbs cut the air. He sighed, and Sabelo asked, "What?"

"What do you mean?"

"That sigh. Why do you do that?"

"I don't know, I just sighed."

"Jackson, who worked with me at the intersection, sighed like that once, just before the static happened. A week later, I found him in the drain. He was gone from us. How do you feel?"

"If you really want to know, I feel tired. I think maybe it is happening. It is coming for me. I am the oldest. Almost nineteen now. The static takes the oldest. I think it is happening."

"You are not much older than us. The same age, basically. We are still fine. Perhaps you are just tired from the journey. You have been driving alone the entire journey."

“Yes, I am tired from the journey, but also this. Show me your hand.”

He held up his hand against the sky. The stars as clear and bright as ever they had been since it happened. He held up his hand, fingers outstretched. Sabelo did the same. Where the charge crackled around Sabelo’s fingers, Michael’s hand glowed with only a weak aura, a gentle throb. There was still something there, but it was different now. There was less of it.

“I think we need to get to the farm while we can,” Michael said. “We need to be able to decide whether... if it’s even...”

“We can be there tomorrow. You said it yourself, it’s only a couple of hundred kilometres. We can be there before sunset.”

“Yes. I want to see it while I can still... I want to see if it’s the kind of place where we can live, or even...”

Sabelo caught his drift and changed the subject.

“Let’s go back. The girls must be wondering where we are.”

They returned to the fireplace, where the girls were oblivious to their absence. The pair were rediscovering Wendy’s reading ability, as she wrapped her clumsy eyes around the car’s driver’s manual, to Lerato’s great mirth.

“With ... the ... cor... rect care ... and mai ... main... te ... nance ... the ... veh ... the veh.. eye ... c ... l ... e. can... Ha, ha, ha.”

And they dissolved into giggles.

"The vehicle," Michael corrected them, trying to help.

"No!" said Lerato, correcting him. "She can do the eye-kill herself!"

"Okay, okay. You're right," he said. "You girls read it your way. Carry on reading about the eye-kill!"

And they did. Deciphering and recyphering the curious symbols of the SUV manual by the light of the fire, on the side of a hill in the bush, while the evening cold set in and the clear sky splashed starlight down upon them. And they huddled around the fire, as big as they dared make it, and they spoke of tomorrow's journey to the farm, and what they might find there.

It might be their destination. It might be the halfway point. It might mark their turn for home. It would be a day of curiosity and wonder. Of possibility and infinity. It might be the last day, or but one of many thousands to come. Tomorrow they would know more. And that itself was a small death. To know was to kill wonder and wild dreaming possibility. Knowledge removed some doubt, but it also limited imagination. To know what happens is to destroy all but one small iteration of what might happen. The experience is but one of a million possible experiences. It might be the only correct one, the outcome that had to happen, but even that aptness is the end of a dream.

Perhaps there would be a new dream to cling to at the end of this trip. A new peak to aim for, a valley to

cross, but this would be the end of the leg. And who knew, perhaps the end of Michael's tenure.

Part of him hoped for the real outcome. He still yearned to know, to understand what the true meaning was. What was the cause of the static? How would it end? What would it all culminate in? When would the next phase begin, as surely it must?

But he realised also, that there were limits to knowing. At best, they would know what would happen tomorrow. Given the grace of another day to live, they might know what would happen the day after that. This was what passed for knowledge in the days since it happened.

Hoping to know any more than that was self-deception. Meaning? Who on all the land still dreamt of such certainty! Who could still delude themselves that they could divine meaning in the chaotic happenings of these days?

And who could ever? Was meaning not always a type of fallacy, a self-delusion? Was there ever a categorical interpretation of anything, and was the truest meaning not simply the one that someone believed in most passionately?

The truest truth is that one we believe the most strongly.

Our own truth is subjective. It must be, since objective truth is impartial, fair, dispassionate, weak. Our truth is the one we believe most vehemently. When it is

disproved, we either dismiss the proof on the grounds of our earlier belief, or we accept the proof, but stop caring as much. And that is not a truth. To accept an explanation is not to believe. And perhaps it is also to know a bit less.

So, Michael understood that he might never know the cause, or the reason, or the meaning for what had happened. He would not know it any more than he had really known the meaning of what had come before. What had caused it? Why? And what did it mean?

He no longer knew. He had known the most when he was a small child in Uncle Oscar's car on the way to Montessori with Wendy in the back seat beside him, singing *Daddy Finger, Daddy Finger*.

All that came afterward had been a process of unlearning, disillusionment and realising how little he in fact knew.

So, he mourned his lost knowing as much as the life force he felt ebbing away inside him, and he sang along as he taught young Lerato the rhyme that had once encapsulated everything he had known. All he had learned at the altar of the tablet his father sometimes let him use.

"Daddy finger, Daddy finger..." he began... "Where are you?"

And they beat time on the can of spaghetti and meatballs they had been able to salvage from the burned-out supermarket in the township outside

Reddersburg. Where Lerato had blown open the steel gate with the strength of the static, and they had held a gang at bay, while they loaded up the SUV with supplies, stepping over the body of the shopkeeper, burned to death in his own store, rather than give up his precious supplies.

It was an old one, that. An old death. The kind of story he was familiar with from news reports in the days before.

That night they sat around the fire and they beat time on their empty can of tinned food, with the knife they had used to prise open the lid.

Ting!

Ting!

Ting!

Ting!

They sat on the land, around the fire, and they beat time with their metal implements. They claimed their tiny humanity, in the vastness of the land, beneath the countless stars of the infinite universe.

It was one thing Michael did know, and the others too, Wendy, Lerato and Sabelo, whether they consciously knew or really, viscerally knew. They knew *themselves* in that tiny, vast, enormous moment.

When luminous eyes appeared at the edge of the small circle of light that their fire cast, they knew their

place. Whether these were ancient adversaries, or new opponents of the next phase, it mattered not.

They were a small band of humans on the vast, wild land. Their weapons were few, some legacy bits of metal salvaged from the time before, left in trust to perhaps preserve their lives if the opportunity came.

So they beat their metallic four time, there where they had made camp on the land, and they stared the eyeballs down. Four sets of eyes, just beyond the edge of light. They never moved, and as the rhythm captured them, Michael came to believe... No, he came to know, that those eyes were their reflection. That was them, as they would seem to others. Four mesmerised, transfixed beings, staring at their mortality, considering their fate.

And he knew, too, that he was of the land. Whether of this land, or another. This patch, this corner of it. This district, this country, this canton, this wooded federal state, that dusty village... he was of the land, and whether it was the static that claimed him, or one of these beings at the edge of his vision. When his time came, he would return to the land. That, he knew.

One day, with luck, they would lie his body down, flat upon the land, and he would be absorbed into it. In the period of the land, it would be quick. Against the aeons that the land abides, his returning to the land would be but a moment. He would be breathed back into the land. Inhaled. As dust.

The land would claim him back. He would become the land. And the land would do it humbly, inevitably, ultimately. The land did not shout about him. The land never declared ownership over him. The land knew he belonged, and once his journey was at an end, he would return.

The land knows.

Without thinking, the land knows.

Without doing, the land knows.

Without saying, the land knows.

Without understanding, the land knows.

The land is, and the land knows.

That knowing was a comfort to Michael, as he stared into the eyes of his reflection. Here was his destiny. Whether tonight, or tomorrow. He would return to whence he came. He would return home. His circle journey would complete itself and he would find himself where he had started.

And for once, for one last time... perhaps for the only time, he would know.

When they awoke in the morning, they were alone upon the land, the four of them inside the vehicle, the windows misted up. Frost across the windscreen. The tinned food by the ashes of last night's fire, frost on the knives left out.

They must have crawled inside with the last of their energy.

Michael's energy was fast running out; he could feel it. He could just sleep the sleep of ages. And he missed the knowing of the night before.

The new day was bright and angry. Its mysteries appalled him. The possibilities, the options. The thousand outcomes, all there for the choosing. Where before, they excited him, now they were horror.

Why was he confronted with chance, when he wanted certainty?

But the random possibilities were what pulled young Lerato into consciousness in the back seat.

"Where are we going today," she wanted to know. But even when told, she still did not know.

"Uncle Oscar's farm," she said, but she was just repeating words. She was getting to know words, but words are not knowing. Words are attempts to know. They are approximations in our minds that try to capture the essence of what they describe. They hint.

Experience can bring you closer to knowing. But even that is not knowing. After words, and experience, the next step is feeling, understanding. And then comes knowing.

Lerato would take a step towards knowing. By this evening, with luck, they would be on Uncle Oscar's farm. Getting to know it.

The words would start to become real.

They completed their morning ablutions and coaxed a last surge of warmth from the embers. They shared a final can of beans.

Lerato walked off a way and did her static work, manipulating the energies of the air. Juggling, spinning, projecting it. Dancing with it, choreographing its movement. Her ability was unique, and none of them could teach her how to use it. She was her own pupil, as indeed we all are.

But in this trade, she was alone. She was a weaver of light, a smith of the forces of energy. An engineer of the rivers of the universe. A painter with the stars.

As he watched her conduct her ritual, Michael felt a tiny shard closer to knowing. The energy she conducted was of the sky. But he saw now, as she sat cross-legged on the land, that it was also of the earth. Or perhaps it was the earth that was of the stars.

That meant that the static was not a disruption of the equilibrium of the earth, but a reawakening, a rekindling of the true nature of the land. The land was not the base, the final and ultimate, all-knowing base source of all that ever was and ever would be. The earth was the stars. And the stars were but the light remnants of what had once been. The stars are messages from the past, travelled to tell us only that they once existed.

“Know this,” they say to us. “Once, before you were, I was.”

And our puny star, or land, our earth, in reflecting that light of knowing, will one day say the same. One day, if even, all that ever was on this land, all the knowing, the living, the being, will be but light in the eye of one so far away that they are not yet. They are the future.

All we will finally be will be light. Our light, but also the reflected light of all that ever was before. All that we will finally do is reflect light from the distant past into the future.

We are trustees of light. We absorb; we accept; we reflect. Perhaps perchance, we project.

Lerato sat on the Highveld grass, and she accepted the light. The static danced around her, as it once had done around Michael and Sabelo, when they barely knew what they were doing.

The light twirled about her. Wendy skirted the space around Lerato, eager to join, but knowing that this was the dividend of youth. It was the child who could best accept the light, and the child who could best reflect it.

Lerato was the clear, polished bright mirror of the light. She took the light into herself; it fragmented around her, like dandelions on a breeze. She giggled at its mischief, and again Michael knew what it was.

It was her. The light was her nature. The dancing points of light were Lerato's joy. They were the very lust for life that lived in her, made manifest. They were

life. In welcoming the static, the energy, the life force of it all, she absorbed it inside her, and glowed it back out.

In a final gesture of the ritual, Lerato clasped her hands to her heart, and drew the light inside her, where it glowed for a moment and then went quiet.

She smiled the mischievous smile.

She did not yet know. She was learning. With courage and joy and zest, she was welcoming the energy in.

He noticed also, that with Lerato, the phenomenon was not static, but a purer energy. It, too, was light, but it danced and flowed. With the rest of them, particularly now, it crackled and fizzed. It surged, then died.

Perhaps...

After she had completed her morning ritual, Michael walked into the veld and sat, as Lerato had done. Where usually he flinched from the static, braced himself as if anticipating a seizure, now he tried to accept it. He welcomed it. He wanted it.

He felt a warm sensation coming up from the earth and a small, slow surge of lazy energy. Like a Saturday lie-in. It was cosy.

The icy claw that had begun clutching at his heart the day before, began to thaw. In the corners of his eyes, he almost felt he saw soft points of light. Distant balloons in a windy sky.

As he wondered to himself whether the static work might be coming to some kind of fruition, as soon as he

tried to know... it vanished with a snap. And the fatigue was back.

In his bones he felt a new fever. It would not be that easy.

He dragged himself to his feet. There was no time for a "Michael finds himself" workshop.

They already had the light-warrior portfolio filled. He was the driver. Best he do some driving while he still could.

After loading up, and just before leaving camp, Michael and Sabelo inspected the edge of the campsite, where they had spotted those eyes watching them. There was not a track to be found.

"You saw them too, right? They were around here!"

"I saw them, but I'm not sure where they were watching us from. If they were here, they might have been the size of dogs, or hyenas. But they could have been further off, and just... bigger."

But what could they be then?

"I don't know. They're gone now. We should get going too."

They syphoned the petrol into the fuel tank using the last of the jerry cans and the length of hosepipe they'd retrieved from Annie's garden. Michael piloted the SUV back onto the dust road from the track they had found. They made their way back to the main road.

The road was deserted. Not even a single wreck scarred the road between Smithfield and Rouxville.

Even Hope was not prepared to go to the Southern Free State to die.

At the Aliwal North bridge, Michael brought the car to a stop.

“There’s water here. We must load up. Fill the fuel canisters. We can’t be sure what we’ll find. After the river, we head up into the mountains.”

The steel-frame truss bridge narrowed the road to a single lane. On the far side, an overgrown resort, perhaps still eerily occupied, afforded access to the river. Today, it flowed lazy and brown.

Michael eased the car onto the bridge and trundled across, pausing briefly to cast a glance up the valley into the mountains where the river had its source.

When he looked back ahead across the bridge, he saw a vehicle stopped at the far side. Was it waiting to cross?

No. It was the silver Land Cruiser. Morningside!

As the realisation hit Michael, Morningside kicked open the driver’s door, stepped onto the asphalt and fired at them.

“Down!”

They dived onto the floor of the vehicle as bullets ricocheted off the bonnet, and shattered the rear windscreen.

“They’re shooting from behind!” screamed Wendy.

Sabelo retrieved the two handguns from the console and handed the CZ-75 to Michael. But there was no

chance to fire a shot. Bullets were slamming into the car from two sides.

Michael raised his head for a second, and a bullet struck the centre pillar. But that second glimpse was all he needed. He could turn the ignition and squash the gas pedal into the floor. The SUV roared up against the inside of the bridge trusses. Sparks erupted off the side of the vehicle as they bore down on Morningside – him firing the last of his clip into the windscreen.

Then... contact!

The car launched off the other SUV at an angle, reared up, then landed. Michael guessed that Morningside would dive for cover at the last second, and grant him a few precious moments to recalibrate. He spied Morningside firing from cover in a drainage ditch. Nothing made contact. Perhaps he was out of ammo. Back on the far side of the bridge, Morningside's sidekick was sprinting towards the contact point.

Michael dragged the car to the left, the gearbox screaming for mercy. He slammed it into third and they lurched into a more sustainable sprint. Something pinged off the roof.

“Everybody okay?”

“Ja.”

“I’m okay.”

“What about Lerato? Lerato? Where’s Lerato?”

“Lerato!”

She was no longer in the vehicle.

By a stone church in the forsaken town of Aliwal North, Michael brought the car to a halt.

“Is she in the car or not?”

Their worst fears were confirmed. They had lost the girl.

“We’ve got to go back for her!”

“But where did she go? The doors were never open!”

“Did you see her get out?”

“What happened?”

“I think I saw her go,” said Wendy. “When the shooting started, she caught fire and... she was gone. She was right here.”

She patted the seat on her left. s

“She was sitting right here, then she... She just disappeared...”

“Are you sure she’s not... Could she still be inside the car?”

“No. She’s gone.”

They heard the howl of an engine up the street, then squealing tyres. Before they could react, their pursuers had slammed their car into the kerb in front of them, wedging their vehicle into a captive submission manoeuvre.

Morningside, in the driver’s seat, leaned across his co-pilot, pointed a handgun at Michael’s head and pulled the trigger.

Michael was close enough to see the barrel flash, but its outcome was unexpected... Instead of a bullet,

slamming into him, the firearm exploded in the boy's hand. He dropped it like he'd been burned. His companion jumped in alarm. They were panicked. There was something in the car with them. They had wedged the passenger door against their car. They were trapped on the one side. Now they dived for the driver's side door. Morningside fumbled with the handle and got no response.

Now sparks ricocheted around the interior of the vehicle. Lashing the occupants, opening up angry wounds across their arms, their faces...

The sparks became trails of light, spinning, shooting, redirecting, burning into flesh with frothing chemical foam bursts. Morningside and his mate screamed in agony. The lights circled even faster. There were sparks and hisses. Wild, animal shrieks, and then a silent, aftermath. The fog that often follows an action.

Michael, Sabelo and Wendy exited the vehicle onto the empty Aliwal main street. Up and down the street, there was not a soul in sight. Morningside's SUV was now filled with a cloud of smoke and flesh. A fine, pink mist had condensed on the inside of the windows. It ran down in little rivulets. A single sneaker was visible against the windscreen, at an odd angle on a twisted, motionless foot.

A soft stream of lights exited the vehicle. They passed through the glass and circled the observers. These were the same lights Lerato had summoned that morning.

The lights performed a circular dance, widening and then ascending. The lights coalesced, separated and then burst into myriad vaporous particles, dissolving into the sky like stars at dawn.

“Lerato!” said Wendy.

“She’s still here, said Sabelo. “You can feel her.”

“I think she likes it like that,” said Michael. “We should go. I think she’s with us.”

They climbed back into the car just as a rumble came resounding down the valleys from the deep in the mountains. A shadow fell across the town, and Michael sensed a storm approaching for the first time since his sortie to the shopping mall, when he’d gone on that mission to contact Uncle Oscar... If he didn’t know better, he would believe that his was the solo patrol that had summoned the static. That merciless electrical storm that had rained its pulses of energy down on the earth with such vigour that it had effectively never left. That was the night of arrival, when whatever it was, had touched down upon the earth, and taken up residence in their very bones.

After that night, when he had awoken, flushed with the success of his first one-man raid, he had felt something else, a spark, a surge, a charge within him. After that, the things had started to happen. The elders lost their strength and that magic within them that made them worthy of respect. And then the youth had come up. Either to fill the void, or because they had

always been there, but ignored. And now they would not only be heard, but they would be seen and felt. They would do what they knew must be done.

What needed doing now was this journey out of the past to a new reality, powered by a new energy.

The energy was capricious. Sometimes it was so shy as to be almost absent. You wouldn't believe it was there if you hadn't known better. You would notice it because you knew what to look for. The subtle glow, the sheen on everything. The spark when people touched. There was that static in the air, the lightning in the day. And the zero-sum energy. At any time, there could only be so many people channelling the energy. Only the few were called. The youth. The elders just did not get it.

And then at other times, the static just stretched its legs, it had to express itself, to show off. Tonight, that energy was at large. On the mountain peaks that were visible on the road out of Aliwal, the sky impaled great forks of charge on the slopes. Thunder rolled down to meet them. Now without a windscreen, the car welcomed the crisp, earthy mountain gusts. They felt the first spots of rain on their faces as they entered the hill country. The land of Uncle Oscar, they told each other.

With the air-con off, nursing the speed, down on energy again, they eased their way up the tarmac. Aliwal had once been inhabited, but now there was

nothing. Just the green foothills and the static warfare of the gods in the sky, up where they were headed.

Just before the signs told them they would reach the town of Barkly, Michael recognised the short-left turn that would take them into the uplands. When you said Oscar lived in Barkly, that was really just the name of base camp. Barkly was the staging post where you finally left the world behind and ascended into the sky.

Today, there would be no staging. Michael had found Barkly unwelcoming on his previous visit, and he didn't expect it would be any different this time. There would be no more towns on their journey. Now, they were on the final leg.

The sun was setting, and the farm roads would be mud. There might be at least an hour of off-road driving before they reached the farm. That was supposing that Michael could still remember the route.

He sprang onto the farm road and fishtailed onto the dirt. Immediately he noticed the tracks. Car tracks. Not just one, several. This road had been used recently. People had arrived, or people had left. There was activity in this part of the world, somewhere up there, where the blacksmith of the gods was beating his sickle into shape, up there, there were people living.

Was it sanctuary, or was it Armageddon?

It looked some kind of way, but things did not always reveal their nature visibly.

The rain began to fall the very minute they turned onto the farm road, and there was indeed mud. The first climb resolved itself into a plateau, where the route forked, and the tracks all chose the right turn.

Within ten kilometres, the road plunged into a gorge, harbouring a forgotten railway line, now half swallowed by the hillside. They reached a stone bridge across a river, and began an ascent; the shot-up SUV clung to the face of a cliff to reach the next plateau. Here, the static was newly violent, striking the rock face, cleaving loose great chunks of granite like mortar bombs from the sky. The car rocked under the assault, but emerged from the blast and forged on.

Dusk set in, and now the rain fell with intent. In the gloom, lights became visible up ahead. They were like deceptive fireflies, either leading the way, or luring them in. Michael took the bait.

The second valley was steeper, and in the thickening darkness, far less welcoming. The lights were joined by others. At first, he thought Lerato might be directing them, but now there were many. This was a welcoming of sorts, he now felt.

Wendy rolled down the window and the bunnytail lights ran through her fingers, like the phosphorescent wake of a fishing boat at dawn.

Now the fishtailing rear of the car gained a life of its own. On a corner near the third of a series of false summits, the car spun out into a flooded ditch.

“Come, quick. We must all get out! We need to push!”

With the gears in neutral, the three of them were able to push the SUV back onto the road, electric raindrops stinging them like a thousand crystal shards of light. The water ran into their eyes, their ears, their noses.

Then they splashed back inside the vehicle, and Michael piloted the car to the crest of another hill. This one... this one looked familiar. Was this it?

As one, the lights danced off the road and down a precipitous farm road, a muddy track that would brook no return journey. At least not in this weather.

Not in this weather.

But Michael had not signed up for a return journey. This trip had been looking like a one-way ticket ever since they'd negotiated that first pile of wrecks at the Grasmere toll plaza, if he was honest with himself.

He cast them off the beaten-up track, chasing the light balls, down towards a farm he had never recalled the name of, Uncle Oscar's, the home of the man he barely remembered. Or perhaps he had constructed him, from spare parts of the kind of father he'd always wished he'd had, some rides to playschool and a handful of text messages that could have come from outer space as much as anywhere in the Barkly East district.

On the valley floor, the track swung right to follow an angry stream towards a stone barn. The headlights of

the SUV carved jagged stripes into the rock, short-circuiting sparks came striating off the surface.

The rain fell in vertical sheets of mercury, splashing down in liquid explosions. Glutinous puddles of sulphurous illumination congealed in the mud. They would sleep in the car until morning. Granted the mercy of fate, they would all awake.

Then they would see what they would see.

“You made it! I never thought you’d get here.”

It was Caleb who greeted them in the morning.

Caleb greeted them in the morning!

Their leader, spiritual guide and battle general in the bloody Sandton complex wars. Veteran of the great hunting-and-gathering campaigns of Sandown Extension 14. Caleb!

The broken shell, whom they had left to decay and waste away, he lived and breathed.

Not only that, but he walked the proud land with swagger. He strode upon it like he owned it. Far from his dissolving life force being consumed by the static, here it seemed amplified. Energised. If indeed this mountain eyrie was the source of the static, as it had seemed from down in the valley, then Caleb had not been destroyed by the static, he seemed to be powered by it.

In fitted head-to-toe khaki and leather work boots, Caleb bade them a hearty welcome to the farm.

“I’m so glad to see you. Well done for making it, and greetings. Let me show you where you’ll be staying.”

He turned on his heel and marched off before they could interrogate him.

“We should follow him,” was the best that Michael could muster, still shaking the sleep from his eyes. He would continue doing that for the next half an hour.

As the three travellers stumbled out of the car onto the damp, green grass of the farm, lush lucerne fields waved in the morning sun.

“Growing it for hay,” Caleb explained. “High protein for the livestock.”

“We’ve also got fifty hectares under maize. But we going hydroponic with the vegetables.”

“Uncle Oscar?” Michael enquired.

“Gone back to Joburg,” said Caleb.

“What?”

“He moved back to the city.”

“But he was the whole reason we...”

“I know. Me too.”

“What? You mean he’s not here any more,” asked Wendy in disbelief.

“He left about a week ago,” said Caleb. “Which is when I found myself here.”

“You *found* yourself here.”

“Exactly. I woke up on the floor of the main house. I felt like crap. My mouth was so dry... I was spitting feathers.”

“You live in the main house?”

“No, it’s where you go when you first arrive. Then you move into the accommodation. I’m sharing a house with Annie. You remember Annie? The old lady from number 18? Shame. She’s fine now.”

“She’s here?”

“That’s not all. You won’t believe who else is here, Michael...”

“Who?”

“Come and see for yourself.”

Caleb led the way to a cottage overlooking the lucerne field, inside a small grove of pine trees.

In the garden outside, on a deckchair, reclining, smoking a cigarette., sat Denver

“You?” exclaimed Wendy. “What are you doing here? I thought you were dead!”

“So did I,” he said. “Maybe I am.”

“But then why?” she turned to Caleb in shock. “I thought this place was... And how did you all get here? We left you behind...”

Denver stood and came to stand by Caleb.

“It doesn’t matter where we were and how we travelled,” he said. “Directions just aren’t a thing now. You got here one way, and we arrived via another route.

Everyone gets here in the end. This is where it all goes down.”

“Where what goes down?” asked Michael.

“Where we find out what happens. Aren’t you curious to know how it all ends?”

“Of course. That’s why we came here.”

“Us too. So now we all get our chance to make it happen,” smiled Denver. “Here on the farm, anything is possible. You can make your dreams your reality. I am growing my own business. This is just my view. When I want, I can do my real work, which is growing the youth.”

“Live and grow,” grinned Caleb. “Here in the mountains we finally have the space and the peace to live the way we want to, and to grow a new society without having to fight for our lives.”

They were strolling in the garden overlooking the lucerne fields. Caleb and Denver walked shoulder to shoulder, holding forth on the nature of their lives on the farm. Denver, too, was clad in the gear of a gentleman farmer. He wore a two-tone top, a leather belt, denim shorts and woollen knee socks with his work boots.

As they walked gentle laps of the garden, the men made expansive gestures into the valleys that fell away to the south-west. At the foot of this valley was a vast plain, stretching to both horizons.

“You will all join up with your cohort here,” said Denver. “All of the youth are gathered here. Here, you get an education and you learn how to become a productive member of our society. We teach you how to contribute, so that one day, you can live like this. So you can relax and enjoy the end of your life”

There was a beat.

Then Wendy charged. She had been silent since their arrival at the cottage. But she had been quivering in disbelief. Now, a boiling rage came out. She threw herself bodily onto Denver. She plunged her nails into his face and tore at his eyes. A scream came out of her from where her deepest pain still lived. She knocked him to the ground, and the others rushed to pull the two apart. In seconds they were separated, but a spell had been broken.

“Never,” she screamed at Denver! “I will never be educated by you. I will never live in a place where you still live. You must be destroyed! You are everything that is evil. You are the devil. The darkest thing! How can you be walking around like this in this place where we came to find peace?”

“What is all of this?” asked Sabelo. “This cannot be true. We left you dying in the city. We travelled hundreds of kilometres over several days. We felt the static rising. We felt the molecules exploding all of this apart. We felt ourselves dissolving. Now we come here and it’s all the way it was before. This cannot be!”

Caleb smiled. Denver smiled.

“Ah,” said Caleb. “I see you’re starting to get it. This is not a holiday camp, and yes, this is not real in the way that life in the city is crisp and physical. But it is more real than anything you have ever lived.”

“This is the final round,” said Denver. “This is the last battle. Anything is possible here. Any outcome you can imagine is real. If you can think it, it becomes. The molecules allow it. This is where the static rules. Up here, all we are is energy. We have no need for physical shells, except to show ourselves to each other.”

As he said that, his body dissolved in front of them. He diffused into the air in a shower of purple points of light. The lights spun and twisted, then ascended in a spiral of effervescence into the sky. The purple arced above them in an array that was now gold and even black light. It coalesced and then rained down as particles, then it condensed and composed itself into an anthropomorphic shape. Denver again.

“I can do anything. I am all powerful. All I am is my will. I understand this place. So, I am a leader. Me and Caleb, we are like the conductors of this orchestra of light. Whatever we can imagine, we make it like that. And it happens. You see these fields? Lucerne has such a lovely green, but they could just as easily be wheat, or barley or corn or stands of gum trees.”

As he spoke, the fields on the edges of the valley transformed to become new fields of new crops, forests,

fields again, at his command. Forests again. Finally, the land was a stand of towering eucalyptus, as he had willed it.

“You see now?” said Denver, looking directly at Wendy for the first time. “You think you can fight me? You really want to fight me? You remember how you tried to fight me before, and how weak you were? This is the same as that. Only that time we were stuck in the world. Now we are here and I am all powerful. For a while, you young ones had the run of the place. While we were expiring, losing our skin. But now, here, there is only energy and spirit and the strength of will. And my will is the strongest. Even Caleb knows it. Isn’t it?”

Caleb nodded slowly. He briefly glowed a dark maroon halo of regret, then recalibrated.

“This is not what I hoped it would be,” he said. “When I woke up here, I thought I was in heaven. And in some ways I was. But then I realised that there is no escape from our nature. We are our spirits, confined in physical forms. On our journey, we learn to live, but also to grow. We learn to grow our bodies and our spirits. When our bodies no longer serve us, we are just spirit. That is what we are here, spirits of energy. But that energy is our true essential nature. So here, even though everything is any way it can be, we are our true selves. We do not become good, simply because we are spirits. Some of us are good, and some of us...” he cast his eyes across at Denver.

“Some of us are all powerful,” he said. “You thought you had woken up in heaven. But it can just as easily be hell. Just because your molecules are coming loose, and your bodies are more optional, why does that free you from the eternal choice? You think you can transcend the physical, but not have to choose? You think you come here and everything will be good? Well I’ve got news for you. What even is good, if not just your own way? It is good when things work out in your favour. What you want is good. What you don’t want is evil. I am the one who truly understands that, and that is why my way holds sway. That is why you will be educated by me, and why you will join your energy with that of the others. You will see. We will become one, we will live and grow, as we did before. This is simply another plane. You are new here. You barely know how to control your own molecules. You must be taught.”

He gestured towards Wendy. There was a golden ripple of light across her chest. Stars briefly erupted out of her. Denver flicked his finger and they vanished. Sabelo advanced on Denver, glowing a dark cyan. Denver raised his finger, and Sabelo’s glow dissipated. He shrunk back into his physical frame. Michael flexed his fists and opened his mouth wide. A stream of light emerged from his forehead, deep scarlet and brown. The stream projected out at Denver. He waved it away. He made a fist and Michael crumpled back into himself

“You see? I can control your molecules better than you can. I’m only helping you people to understand. You have all abilities, but you do not yet know how to use them. You are just energy, but you cannot channel it, direct it. I am the one who can. You came on a journey you did not appreciate. Everybody does. Everyone ends up here. This is where it all leads. To a place of energy and spirit and light. But what you must realise is that it is still governed by power. The one who is most powerful will have his way. The power is different, but it is the way. And right here, right now, I am the power. Power will always accrue to the ones who need it most, and those who know what they want to do with it. I know how to use the power. That is why I have it. I direct you. To the schools with you...”

He waved them off, and the three of them – Michael, Wendy and Sabelo – felt themselves borne up in a new column of light, a column that contained all of them.

But Wendy would not go. Her energy resisted being directed. Even while she knew she needed knowledge, she would not accept it from the one who had kept her captive. She fought it.

The light column wavered. For the first time in this place of light and fluidity, they saw static, the friction between worlds. Wendy brought the static. And the sight of the static led all three of them to resist together. Wendy, Sabelo, Michael. They gained independence of flight and they flew up, up into the clouds around the

peaks even higher than the valley occupied by Denver and Caleb, to where, even now, new light was visible, wreathed in a new static. They renewed their bond, they three. And in doing it, they summoned their companion Lerato. Once they changed form, and once they summoned her, she manifested with them and she spoke.

“It is right that you live your own idea of this way. The way of spirit and light is a time of energy, and now energies are at war with each other. Once the spirit is free of the body, it remains the spirit it was. Leaving a body is no guarantee of finding the path of love. Sometimes liberation from the physical gives a dark spirit new ways of living out their selfishness. Do not mistake the spirit world for a higher plane of life. This heaven is at war, it has been captured, just as the physical one was. Just as strength of will tends to lay claim to the land, so it lays claim to the spirit; it channels the light to its own ends. Spirit must be liberated just like the body, or it will be put to work in service of the will of others. And that service will not be the way of love. We came here on a quest of love and we are still on that quest, even if our form has changed. That plain of existence, the place of Caleb and Denver is not our destination. They are but here as deceivers, Wendy has done well to sense their purpose. Our journey continues. We must move higher, to the next peaks, where the light lives, where static abides all

states, where the true essence lives. That will strengthen us for the final battle.”

Lerato joined her light with theirs and they left the column that would educate them to the will of the former people. To shape them in their self-serving image. They diffused again and rose invisible into the mists above the highest peaks. Michael felt that they had passed a test, that what he had always dreamed was their destination was only an illusion, not his true quest. Again, he understood that his journey was an act of trusteeship. The quest was a path decided upon by his former self, with an earlier understanding. He held that quest in trust as a loyalty to an earlier Michael, who had other needs and simpler memories of life. He could not stay chained to that goal simply because it was his own. That was selfishness and pride. To continue doggedly, faithfully towards something you once set out for, only because it was once installed as a goal... That is to remain trapped in the ways of childhood. Nothing teaches more about a journey than the journey itself, and to insist on the goal that was set at the beginning, when you had no knowledge of what the journey would bring, is to insist that you will not learn. The student begins her studies with the goal of graduating and qualifying and practising, but in her years of study, she learns her field. She comes to understand herself and her aptitude and how best it might be applied in service of herself and of others. She may realise that her best

path lies outside the discipline she first chose. It may mean leaving the field of study early, or completely, or to choose another one. The lesson lies in the journey.

Someone might set out to write a book, but reach their final insight after a few pages. A surfer might catch the wave of her life at the first attempt. Should she paddle out again?

Some would say yes. That the quest is the journey. Others that achieving the goal is the reason for setting out. The mountain climber, having set out for the summit, does not stop until he has reached it. Some would say that the ascent will be filled with dissuasions and excuses and reasons not to summit and that part of the reason for the climb is to overcome these psychological sidebars. Part of the achievement is having the mental strength to resist and to argue your way through your own cross-examinations.

But the true traveller manages to recalibrate, to readjust and to dig even deeper when the journey turns out to be longer than anticipated. Or when the distance itself turns out to be more demanding than we ever dreamed it could be. And when the lure of resting up, of sinking roots somewhere along the way becomes too real to ignore.

How much of the world is populated by migrants who were on their way somewhere else? Or visitors who never left the place they visited? Is their journey a

failure, or a success? Did they reach their destination, or did their destination reach them?

The wavering is also part of the lesson, but Lerato was not one for wavering. She led them higher. She enlisted them all, and rose to the final peaks, there where there were no more plains. There is always a peak higher than the plain.

And so, they followed their nature into the clouds. They were destined for the summit.

As they rose, they felt the energy fail again. Now the atmosphere played games with them. The breathing became a challenge, as if they were still human, as if this was still the earth, and not some dream allegory making sense of life.

Then Michael knew he wouldn't make it. He realised it was not to be. And he saw the sense in his own failure. He saw that there is as much to learn from not succeeding as from succeeding. Probably more.

But was rationalising failure not the first tactic of the inveterate loser? Yes, and losing was the first step of innovation, of the maverick, the pioneer. Was there any community founder who was not a reject of a former settlement?

Michael the climber fell away. He condensed back into the physical. Having risen beyond the influence of Caleb and Denver, he had achieved his optimum level. Like mist, he manifested out of the vapour and began his descent back onto the land.

The others would not have it.

They circled back. Like currents of energy, they absorbed his mist and bore him up. And so, they rose into the atmosphere, in cycles of strength and wavering and re-ignition. Rising, falling, rising again. But ultimately rising together into the sky until they formed one cycle of energy, until even their individual spirits became indistinguishable and they were but one cycle of energy and love. They had willed their weaknesses away, and become but one intent, bent in service of their constituents.

Now they were molecules, but then they were less than molecules, they were the thing that animates the molecules. The force that vitalises them, gives them life.

Then they were purely trustees of what made them. As their molecules flickered in and out of being, they began to dissipate. They rose beyond the plane of the physical and became vivacity, zeal, strength, passion. They became life, just life.

Life was without pride, without enmity, without jealous strivings. Without conscious goals of attainment, the fuel itself.

Life simply was.

Life simply is.

Life is.

Life.

And there they ceased to be. In ceasing to exist, they became pure and their boundaries vanished. There is but one life.

In the physical, many may become its trustees, but though they are many, they are custodians of the same animating force: life.

As they strive to protect the life force they have been endowed with, they may squabble with each other. They see only the other vessels, not the essence, and thus they become the vessels. And they condense even further; they become even more physical. They become just trustees; the precious force of which they are trustees vanishes deep inside them, and they are just things.

But the same lessons, the same outcome lies in shrinking as in growing. Whether we dissipate into the infinite, disparate ether, or condense into one, solid, indivisible whole, one dark sphere of allness, that is all we are.

In the ether, we are but energies, with no physical bonds. In the sphere of the physical we are only the bonds that bind us together. In all of it, we are one, we simply express it in the dichotomy.

And the journey between the two is humanity. The quest from solidity into vapour.

The quest from the earth to the sky. And back again. We are but the transition. We are the interzone

between the land and the air. Molecules releasing, life learning to express itself in new ways.

The land is alive. The sky is alive with animated molecules. And in between, there is us, the humans. We are the land learning to live like the sky. We are the energy that has been liberated from the earth. We are the soil, the ocean, the forests and the biomass. We are the finite allocation of energy that the earth was given, gradually being liberated.

And we are reluctant. We tend back to the Earth, we return to the land. To the physical. But that is interim. We will grow up from the soil once again, we will reach for the sky and we will die, decay and return to the soil. From there, we will reconstitute as molecules, feed and sustain life in new forms and again reach up, up and out, away from ourselves, ever holding that energy within ourselves that strives for release, for liberation.

Again, we will fail and reconstitute, until one time we achieve the ultimate liberation, and we dissipate.

Then we will be nothing, and everything at once. And the life force that we have held, that we have carried for so long, will no longer be ours to carry. We will be freed from our trusteeship.

Life will simply be, and it will no longer be becoming. That will be our ultimate liberation. We will be freed from the burden of life.

For what are we, if not simply vessels for life?

Life is unitary. For all the myriad manifestations of it, it is one. All of our lives are but examples of life, reflections of how life can manifest itself. Even our consciousness is a suggestion of the one consciousness. We think we are, respectively, because we are, collectively.

We are but that interim step towards the collective consciousness. From the earth, which only is. To the sky, which only is, there is us. And we know. Between being and not being, there is knowing.

We hold the responsibility of being within us. We are trustees of life. And deep within us, we know it. In essence, that is all we know. We know we are alive. All we do, all we create, all we say is because we know we are alive.

We are apes upon the plains of Africa beating together two pieces of metal that we have been able to fashion. We proclaim ourselves. Here we are, we say. This is how far we have come. Of the life we have been given, we have made this.

We are trustees of the life force that is held in original trusteeship within the land. We, as our generations of life, are carrying it to the sky. We are the people of the earth –that is where we come from. We are the people of the sky – that is where we are going.

We are that journey. That journey defines us.

On that journey, there are moments. We stop, we rest, we pause to reflect. We help each other on our way. Some of us stumble, we trip each other up. Sometimes we stop in exhaustion and we can only be.

We stop at the side of the road on our journey, and we exist. We know and we exist.

In our interim state, where we cling to our precious knowing, we have knowledge enough to control molecules, to direct life, we give them the semblance of *creating* life.

Like children, who once watched their parents creating, we play at creating life. Like children learning to make letters, we copy down the writing, unsure of what it means.

We direct the molecules. That is what we do in this state. That is our stage. We are apes upon the earth on a journey to the sky.

Here we are.

This is us.

This is how far we have come.

Ting!

Ting!

Ting!

Ting!

THE TRUSTEES

