Everybody Died on the Shortest Day – A collection of Short Speculative Fiction

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ABSTRACT

For the mini-thesis of my Masters in Creative Writing, I wrote a collection of short stories within the genre of speculative fiction. The collection is accompanied by a brief critical reflective essay.

The stories themselves are all set in Cape Town, on actual places I see every day, but with imaginative twists in the plot, narrative and characterisation since, as Margaret Atwood explained, "speculative fiction is literature that deals with possibilities in a society which have not yet been enacted but are latent". The stories revolve around the subject of death. Each story handles the topic in different ways, some focusing on grief, the fading of that person from one's memory, or denial and even resentment.

Every story contains an element of what Freud termed "the uncanny". The aim of this element was to alter the Cape Town that readers know and bring new insights to the familiar. Stories vary in genre from horror to science fiction and even fabulism, since speculative fiction acts as an umbrella term and utilises many sub-genres to accomplish its narratives. The characters range from a family grafted onto one body to live together, to university friends who tend to their deceased colleague like a pot plant on their windowsill. In this way, I hope to demonstrate that the varied responses to death do not keep the characters further from it, but in fact bring them closer to dealing with it.

My literary influences range between horror, gothic, science fiction and surrealism. Authors such as Franz Kafka, Kobo Abe, Mariana Enriquez and Edgar Allan Poe have profoundly influenced my own writing. In part, as a tribute to these influences, I have sought to write a collection of stories inspired by my personal vision of a speculative future of death in Cape Town.

Keywords: The Uncanny, Futurism, Speculative Fiction, Short Fiction, Horror, Surrealism

Declaration

I, Jordan Van Reenen, declare that "Everybody on the Shortest Day – A collection of Short Speculative Fiction" is my own work, that it has not been submitted for any degree or examination in any other university, and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by complete references.

[Signature] 

Date: 08/11/2024

This thesis has been submitted to Turnitin and has been approved by the supervisor

Dedication

To the very few people I let see my work, the ones that asked me “How did you come up with that now?”, the same people that said, “Take that out”. Thank you.

Acknowledgements

To Keagan, thank you, I could always tell a story was going to be good from your honest reactions. To Kobus, thank you, for guiding me, showing me how to make these stories unapologetically me.

Index

Dog's Head

When I was young a dog mauled my face off. So the doctors took the dog and shot it and gave me its head. They placed its head between my shoulders and screwed my brain into place. I grew into it. But my eyes never did. The longest nights I lay awake wishing they had given me its heart as well. I needed them to give me a heart that would love as only a dog could. For the doctors to be the ones to stitch back inside me a home where the waters could heal the sick. I was told it was a nice dog that only wanted to protect its master. But my eyes only saw a door of teeth and jaws swinging open. The doctors left my heart, as healthy as a human being's could be. And they gave me a beast's teeth instead. Now no matter how many times I scrub away at my gums, I only know what my own blood tastes like. What it feels like to gnaw on one's own bones. And then I am always told. He was such a good boy.

Dial 021 to Mourn

I had three more coins left to call the dead. R30 got you four calls if you found the payphone inside the garden. The garden itself seemed to merge into a building that used to be a second hand car dealership. It was the one next to the Shell Select petrol station on Voortrekker Road, conveniently right opposite the cemetery. They gutted out the interior and installed instead somebody's fevered dream.

The grass on the floor, from what I could see from the phone booth, was a dark green plastic. The foyer had a bunch of benches and a little pond. There were a few people standing around but they all seemed to be deep in thought, and the ones that did talk to you asked if you'd seen the cat with red eyes. As I got deeper into the building, the walls became hedges and got taller. There were more twists and turns and every one of them made me anxious with the thought that I wouldn't be able to find my way back to the exit. And that I wouldn't make my call.

On top of the hedges were all these orange and red glass flowers that illuminated the maze. Some of the flowers were even speakers. You could hear music flowing through them and a voice like in an elevator that announced the time. The ceiling was painted black as the night sky and littered with thousands of tiny LED lights. The voice from the speakers would sometimes say, "Remember to wait respectfully outside while somebody uses the phone." And also, "Don't feed the cat or let him listen in on your conversations."

But I was lucky enough to have had help in finding the black phone booth with the silver handset. It reminded me of those blue and green ones that were around when my cousin and I were like nine or something. You could stick in a card, scratch your coin across it if it didn't work, or just destroy the entire thing if you lived in my neighbourhood. But this particular phone booth had a warm yellow light inside meant for reading, as well as a carpet. I slumped with my arm over the phone, my eyelids getting heavy. But the phone, with its small buttons, was cold to the touch. Again there were more announcements, this time in Afrikaans, saying things like, "Onthou om die kat to bedank" and "Moenie die kat seermaak nie". The last announcement was that we had to remember to tell the cat he could go after he had helped us.

"Oh vrek," I said and started tapping on the glass and doing a thumbs up. "Thanks, my guy, you can go."

The cat obviously didn't hear me, and I knew it was a lie. Several times we'd made eye contact, and several times he'd pretended like it didn't happen and he just did that thing where cats pivot their ears backwards like they can pick up DSTV broadcasts. But his eyes. Oh his eyes. They were beautiful in the way you see a highly detailed painting, but realise how messed up it actually is. But it's fine, I thought to myself, I don't think he can hear me and I need to pick up Jessy from aftercare soon.

So I took a coin and dropped it in, listening to it fall, expecting it to echo as it splashed into all the others. But my coin hit the bottom of an empty vault. There was something about that echo that reminded me how fast my heart was beating.

This wasn't my first encounter with a wind phone before. I hadn't touched one, but I'd long heard about them. Never thought I'd actually use one. Although I'd also never expected my cousin to just leave in an ambulance one day and come back in an urn. And have to raise her child all on my own. And I'd also never expected this phone to actually be connected to something.

Another robotic voice like the one over the speakers told me to punch in the number of the person I had missed the most in this world, and then I'd be patched through. The voice also said I wouldn't necessarily get an answer, but that I should say everything I needed to anyway.

There was a click and I just started.

"Abby … uhm …. Jessie's been doing good …. but she misses you terribly. I miss you terribly. Ma and Pa, Uncle Patrick … just ….yoh man, so many of you checked out during the pandemic. I never thought things'd play out the way they did. But we're keeping on, hey. Yeah."

For a while I just stood there breathing hard, and I could hear something. It wasn't the sound of the oceans but it was similar to how waves moved and crashed, but it was lighter. It sounded like mist if mist could make a noise or maybe that was just something I was hearing in my head. I could smell roses. I could smell Abby. I could see the night sky or was it the black of her hair? Why was it so calm in this place?

And then my minutes ran out.

And with a loud clunk I was back in the warmth of the light.

I rummaged through my pockets to find another coin but somebody tapped on the window. It was a small child in overalls and she was petting the cat. She asked me if she could have her turn and I said yeah.

Abby, Abby, it's like I saw you again.

And then a voice said, "There're more payphones in here." And I turned around to look for the girl, but she was gone and the cat with the marble red eyes was looking up at me in her place.

"I can take you to another one if you want," the cat said.

"I think I'll wait," I said.

Growth

It was about three months in and Reba was already so big. She had grown a few more inches in just a few days. It was the usual up until now. I'd given her water, left her next to the window to watch the beach. The only difference now was that she was wearing some of my clothes. And at this point, even in the sunlight, you could barely notice the light green colour of her skin.

Her fiancé had signed us all up before her funeral had even happened. A Friday, about a week into her death, everybody in the Whatsapp group was just going on at Gary about all the cardboard boxes that had been delivered to our front doors. None of us had any idea of what was coming, because printed on the boxes in bold capital letters was the word GROWTH. They were this company that had just popped up on TV, situated somewhere in Joburg. A ways from us here in Cape Town, they liked sneaking their stuff in between insurance ads like Clientelle or Outsurance.

Myself, I'd seen them a lot in the promotion tab of my Gmail after my uncle was shot. They were so easy to miss if you weren't paying attention, especially when you skipped those five minute YouTube ads.

It's probably how they got Gary.

One call, a simple confirmation of how recent the death was, in a three-day window period, a couple of papers to sign, a lot of money, and you could raise a little potted version of the ones you loved.

Seems Gary had too much love to give and he got us the family pack.

I still remember the moment before I opened my box. On the couch, phone going ballistic in my hand, watching people on the group tear Gary apart for this. But I wondered which part of Rebecca did I get.

I dropped the phone next to me on the couch. I couldn't be bothered anymore. I expected my heart to be racing, to have some kind of cold sweat, but really all I felt was this little hole right beneath my chest. My face felt heavy, though, and I was so tired.

I ripped out all the foam filler around the product. And there was this sleek black box and inside was packaged soil, a special little pot and plant feed in a small packet. And next to all of this

was a cylinder, the size of an aerosol can. And inside this can, floating in a clear liquid, were Reba's eyes.

Leaving the canister on the table my hands found my face, and I curled into myself the way new-borns do. It was like I was trying to rub some kind of warmth back into my skin, to roll out the tired like it was some kind of dough.

The phone raged on next to me, but I was already reading the instructions: "From all of us at GROWTH we feel the need to say thank you. There is no need for condolences or apologies. Just a need for more time. And this is what we want to give you. And more." By the time I was done reading there had to be about over hundred messages and voice-notes telling Gary to voetsek and saying they don't want to be associated with a product from that company. I couldn't give a damn.

Then a call came through from Simone. She told me she was gonna do it, that she already had Reba's ear planted. And I told her, "Yeah, I'll do mine now now."

The first few days I'm sure I could see the fumes wafting around my house. If I sat on any of the three couches in my living room the fumes burnt my eyes. Even when I made food in the kitchen, since there was an open wall that I could look through into the living room and see the window or the TV or now Reba's pot plant, my senses suffered. So instead I'd just sit at the big open window with the black frame next to where I'd left the pot plant. I'd stare out at the beach here in Blouberg. The soil of the plant smelled like methylated spirits and it overpowered the sea salt in the air. The shit even burnt my hand when I poured the opened canister in. The plant feed was this red stuff and it smelt like rotten eggs.

Every few weeks after that a young guy in a suit would drop by handing over new supplies and checking in how everything was going. And each month he'd bring me a new, larger pot, instructing me how to transplant her into it.

All of it felt like heavy labour, even dealing with Gary doing his check-ups and worrying if she had got enough water and hoping she was gonna be fine. I wanted to tell him to worry about his own one instead, but I left it. I knew he was doing his best. I just needed a moment. And that moment was next to the pot plant. All I could hope for was that this wasn't going to be a waste of time.

And it actually went fine.

I don't know why, but initially I expected something mossy to pop up from the soil. I expected something like a fleshy veined tumour to grow from the ground, screeching. But the thing that sprouted was small and green. It grew out of the ground like a smooth cactus but shaped like a person.

A month later there was a small Rebecca, and I could see her breathing. I could see her mouth move and coo like a baby's. And I could feel a little breeze blowing in that tiny hole underneath my chest. A wind inside that was now blowing into something and going somewhere.

By the second month she was even bigger and she could tell me all about what she saw outside. One day she looked at me and suggested, "Let's go to the beach together." I had to tell her no, not until her legs had grown – which, from what I had been told, wasn't actually how she worked. "Just carry me then," she said. Lord, I'd forgotten how persistent she could be.

The truth was I didn't know if I was ready to be seen in public with somebody that GROWTH had created. That, or the fact that it was Rebecca. Or just the thought of being outside.

"Rebecca, look I just…"

"Really? Still?" And her dark green eyebrows lifted and her chin tucked in with that look on her face.

"Sorry, Reba." I was tired and even after death she chuckled at me when I did something stupid. I sat down on the windowsill and we talked about things when we were about like twelve or so. It was about time for her to eat as well. The delivery man arrived and handed me a new mix. He said if she wanted I could let her drink it from a straw until she was ready for solid foods. There was something about that that made me stress a little.

By the third month she had her shoulders back. She had ribs for some reason; she had hips and even knees. I couldn't let her stand out like that, especially in the window. So I gave her things she liked out of my cupboard. This light denim jacket with a tiger on the back that she bought me for my twenty-second birthday; she'd had a matching one and loved to wear it when we saw movies together.

One day I called Simone and asked her how it was going with her Reba.

"Ah, Becka's fine. Listen." And she held her phone out and I could hear a voice humming something in the background. "That's Becka's music for you." My Reba almost never sang, she just wanted to talk about all the things that had happened when we were kids.

“I guess they’re all a little different, huh,” I told Simone. “Mine doesn’t sing but jirre does she keep talking about things I don’t even remember. And get this, just the other day I had to give her a jacket.”

“Aww, that’s cute. She must be so snug in a little jacket for a plant of all things, I didn’t expect you to commit like this to it.” I asked myself, *Little?* I even asked Simone how big her Reba was, and she said about the size of houseplant like in the ads, and when I asked her to send a picture, she said later.

I dropped it. I didn’t want to bother Simone about it all anyways, and before I went to bed, I told Reba goodnight, and she asked could we go to the beach tomorrow, and I had to think about it a long time before saying yeah.

There were a lot of smiles with missing teeth in my dreams that night, and tiny footprints in the sand, and red and yellow and blue buckets to build sandcastles with. I didn’t know if it was possible to have a nice dream about the past. I thought you could only do that with horrible ones and PTSD. But there we all were, little versions of very sad big people enjoying the beach. I woke up crying and couldn’t fall asleep again.

The next morning I walked out of my room into the kitchen and I turned and looked into the front room, and there stood somebody, staring out of the drawn curtains and the open windows into an almost bright white day. Reba turned around, ready for the beach. I was trying to figure out if the moving toes I was staring at were real.

“I don’t think I have shoes that’ll fit,” I said.

After detailed questions about sunblock and photosynthesis, we had something to eat. I handed her something that looked like a Bar-One but smelt medicinal and when we were done, we were off. It wasn’t far. On the way down the hot tar roads of Blouberg she made it her duty to greet every person and every dog that she had been watching for the past three months. At first I was worried that somebody would recognise us and the fact that she was slightly green, and previously dead. But nobody cared, so I just kept my worries to myself.

We took our shoes off and hopped across the sand, over the broken wooden walkway that was submerged in even more white sand and shells, and then right there was the beginning of our ocean.

We walked around under the hot sun. The heavy smell of the salt of the ocean was tossed into the air with every wave. The roar of the crashing sea and the dogs barking and children playing kept a smile on Reba's face, and also on mine. Then at some point my phone rang and it was Gary.

"Hi, broer, sorry man, but dammit yoh … My Rebecca doesn't seem to be doing good, and I uh huh… Could I get help or maybe even see your one? You know the company said the plants would even talk to you one day but mine is always just quiet. Saw a smile here and there though."

Reba was staring into my eyes as the call went on. I knew she could hear what was going on. A part of me wanted to hand the phone over to her but that look on her face was the same one that my parents used to dish out on a Sunday when I had to tell guests on the phone that they were out.

"Ah ,sorry bra," I said. "I'm out at the beach for the day, maybe when I get back a bit later I can help you out. It's a quick walk home."

And then Gary said, "Nah nah its cool broer, next time. I'll just ask Simone then. She's off today anyways. Stay safe brother, big love man."

"Yeah, stay safe, man."

After the call Reba sat down, buried her feet in the sand and stared out at the blue sky. We stayed at the beach for a very long time after the call, and the sun never seemed to drop in the sky.

We kept talking and finally our stories got closer to just a few days before she had died, and then we didn't go further. We were just silent. And then she said, "It's about time for me to head home."

"Cool," I said, but inside I was a bit startled. And deep inside I could feel the wind in that little cave in my chest blowing again. Reba got up, dusted the sand from her legs and joked about how nice it was having knees again.

And I knew she wasn't going back to her place beside my window. She wasn't going to go find Gary. She wasn't going to go see Simone or any other friends of ours. But I could feel that she was being blown by that wind that blew from the cave in my chest, and she just kept walking

into the distance until I stopped watching. And then eventually I couldn't even do that. So I got up and followed her on that little wind.

The Slowest Way to Hit the Floor

Charlotte had a dream where she lived just an inch off the ground. It was her happiest dream. When she was little, she had fallen from a very tall tree. Her dad had screamed and asked if she was mad to climb up so high because she could've broken her neck. So that's all she saw when she closed her eyes at night. Hitting the floor. Lying broken. Since then, she never stood close to any second-floor window. She avoided the foot-bridge from Kensington over into Maitland despite it making her work commute easier. Her father could not even convince her to go see the world with him because the thought of flying on a plane made her seize up. This carried on for years until she started dreaming about never touching the ground. Never hurting again. And Charlotte had that dream so much, that one day she woke up to find her body suspended over her bed.

From then she slipped through life.

It was a nice but lonely time. Charlotte couldn't hold the people she loved anymore. The closer anybody got to her, the further she would be pushed from them. The tiny space between her and other people was taken up by the wind. There was a part of her heart that ached to have somebody so close but not be able to touch her. She would sink deeper into her purple hoodie and hide the sad look on her face. Her parents were very upset about the situation, but her father told her that at least she was safe for now. And then he asked her that question again, but just a little bit gentler now: "What if you do fall?"

The question haunted Charlotte when she was by herself. It followed her into rooms full of people who tried to figure out how she was so untouchable. A point came where everybody called her their favourite living ghost. And then she wondered what would happen to her when she died. In her head her bones would probably go lighter, and she would just drift off into the sky with no hurt. In her head she looked like somebody drowning in light. To her at least the ocean had a floor. When she died, she saw herself rising into nothing when the sky stopped being blue. This thought replayed in her head every quiet moment she had. She was too scared to go sleep because she wondered whether she would die in real life if she touched the ground in her dreams.

Her father noticed her staring off at nothing as the days passed. When he asked her what was wrong, she told him everything. He didn't have any real solution. He could only tell her that he would be there to catch her. That she needed to live her life and worry less about the risks.

Charlotte listened and stared back with dark circles under eyes struggling to stay open. And with a tired smile, and like so many times before, her father tried to hug her. He felt the thick fabric of her hoodie in his hands. The brush of her hair over his cheek and the weight of a slumped head on his shoulder.

When he pulled away, Charlotte's head, too heavy for her neck, fell over onto her own shoulder. That same smile over her face, her eyelids closed. *Sleeping*. That is what her dad told himself. And he bundled her up and carried her to her room.

It felt like he was only carrying a bundle of cloth in his arms. Her room was bright from all the sunlight. Charlotte's father took off her black shoes and placed her softly on the bed, the pillow slowly remembering how to give way. He covered her with the white sheet. Kissed her on her forehead and left the room.

And slowly, gently, the sheet rose.

A Place for the Few of Us

Today I nearly went down those steps on my way to varsity. But I was scared of falling into nothing.

There wasn't a rush. I didn't have to be at campus for a while, so there wasn't an urgent need to take the staircase closest to our door on the second floor. But I still went to check whether that step was still there.

I walked down counting each time I heard a click from my shoes on the staircase, until I reached the sixth count and then jumped over the last bit onto the landing below. It always felt a little darker on this part of the staircase.

I spend a lot of time thinking about that step. It takes up the space in my head when I'm in bed, when I eat food, cycle down Bunny Street into 5th Avenue. Nothing gets that step out of my mind. Some days I wake up with my heart beating away like it heard something in the dark, but I know it's the thought of that staircase, because a minute later it's the only thing I can think about again.

I've lived with a step that can make people disappear.

I've seen my own family walk over it and nothing happen to them. But since I was little I knew they didn't see that step the same way I did. Even when they all left over the years, leaving just me, my cousin and my sister, I've always had this picture in my head that they leave our room and walk straight to that staircase. That they find that step and then wait.

When I got home that day I took the safe staircase on the right of the building. As I unlocked our red front door and walked inside I realised nobody was there to greet me. Standing inside the house with everybody gone, with the white curtains pulled closed, it felt like there were still pieces of the night hiding in the corners of the room. I thought about the step then went to bed.

This time my heart was still. When I stood up it was 6pm. The strong smell of chicken curry lured me into the kitchen but nobody was in sight. There was the muffled drone of a TV in the room down the hall, and I remembered that I'd heard a similar sound coming from the step.

I went outside to an orange sun.

I walked towards the red railing and looking to my right where I could see the sun going to hide behind Table Mountain. The light was beautiful and I filled my lungs with as much air as I could. Three children were playing with one of those bouncy Shoprite balls, a yellow and blue spotted one that bounced off the corridor and the ceiling. They were yelling at one another not to let it fall down below. In the room next to ours I could hear laughter through the window. The streets were busy with people and cars.

The kids kicked the ball a bit too hard and it rolled towards the staircase. I was just standing waiting for a reason. When I kicked the ball back to them I turned and walked towards the stairs again to check.

When I got there a man I didn't recognise was standing looking directly down at the third step. I was ready to greet him out of reflex, but then realising what he was after I watched. He looked up. There were always people looking for the step.

"Oh, sorry man, I was just… is this *the* step?"

I nodded.

"Gonna sound not right in the head here," he said. "But I've been daydreaming about this thing all day lately. I tell my wife and she says I'm a bit mad and shouldn't worry about something stupid like this. But sjoe! It's tricky to keep it off the mind." He chuckled to himself rubbing his mouth and resting his other hand on the hip of his blue overalls. "I tell her one time that I can even hear it. We sit there watching a YouTube video and you know when the quality drops to pixels and it sounds bad? Now we were watching an orchestra and it did that, and that sound hit me and I tell her that's what I hear when I think about the step."

I stared at him.

"A concert with lots of heavy sounding strings," he continued.

I raised my head to give a small nod. "Something like the earth moving," I said.

"Yah you know it. Do you also maybe know anybody that's stepped on it? Like the story with that laaitie who said his parents disappeared after standing on it. And then when he showed the police where, they said he was gone the next moment too."

"Yah, every day I see people come and go through it. A lot of them still live here."

The man seemed disappointed when I said that, and relieved too, and he told me to stay safe after staring at the step for a little bit longer.

When he left, I watched the third step for a bit from up on the landing. It was now a different number from where I was standing. It was so many different things. It felt like it was always changing but not in this place.

I remembered that when I was seven somebody told me a story about a drunk man with one arm who was looking for his way back home here in the flats. He fell asleep next to the step. People said he slipped inside and was never seen again. I never dreamt it. Or saw it. But I see that man slipping away now, his only arm feeling for the ground as he fell, no clue where he was going to end up.

The next day, coming from the tuck shop across the road, I stopped and sat down next to the step. I even rested my can of Sprite on it knowing that nothing was going to happen. The step was cracked in different places, chipped on the edge, even scribbled on with pink and red crayons. But the way I sat kept my body an inch from it, and I only ever took a few sips from my Sprite can before I put it down and didn't touch it again. I kept my hand on the step above it while I rested against the wall thinking about home. Nobody was probably there again.

"So it's actually the fourth step." A young woman's face spoke from behind the black bars of the railing.

"Jirre, my heart!" I said with a jolt. "Fourth step what?"

"The one you're sitting on."

"No, it's this one." I pointed.

Her eyebrows furrowed and she made a humming sound, like she was trying to match a tune she couldn't find. And when she gave up the woman didn't say anything for a long time, to the point where I realised there weren't any other noises around us.

Then she said, "Maybe it just doesn't like me."

I waited for her to leave but she said her friend was on the third floor and walked up every step smiling. I wanted to lean my elbow over the next step to prove something. I wanted to take another sip from my drink because my mouth was drying up.

But I couldn't do either.

I left. I went down the stairs and walked all the way across and up the other staircase thinking about the first time I got here as a child and was told it was a good thing I'd never come up the bad staircase. I reached my door and I didn't want to go in because I knew nobody would be home. All that I could do was sit and work and wait for the next day until something changed. But nothing ever did. And I was much older now and I knew that I had to face my fears.

So I walked past my door and back to the staircase. My Sprite can was still standing on it, but the rectangular surface it was on was as black as staring into the night. I heard that noise again, something heavy moving underneath the earth. I counted the steps, again and again, and I was always right about which one it was.

When my foot touched the surface I didn't sink into anything. The sound didn't get louder, in fact it stopped. I even realised my chest was calm. I stepped off it, picked up my cooldrink can and went back upstairs.

And I walked out into a red afternoon.

I leaned over the grey cement wall next to the railing and looked out onto an empty Bunny Street. The doors of homes and shops that were open were black on the inside. None of the cars in the street moved, there were no barking dogs but there was a little boy playing with a few stones in the parking lot below. And in the street walked a man with only one arm.

I should've been scared, but I felt at peace. And then I heard that heavy rolling sound again. And it was coming from my door. I noticed there was somebody home. And for the first time in a long time I was happy go inside.

We Only Have One Chance to Bleed

I stood looking at all my friends' faces pressed up against the glass, as if they were asleep under water. Pat with the birthmark stretching up his right cheek, growing from my middle finger. Melissa, on my index finger, who even when asleep seemed to be grinning about something. And then Steve, growing out from my ring finger, his brow furrowed and dreaming. I took a long sip of water from the glass in my hand.

I was the reason they were dead. I had let them go into the ocean without me. We were just supposed to spend some time at night walking on the beach together. Melissa loved to watch the waves move at night. I didn't know when last I had smelt the salt of the ocean but I was so excited to get lungfuls of it. I thought we'd gone out there for some time to ourselves. It was supposed to be our brief holiday from a horrible year, a year of so much loss. So when they asked if I wanted to come with that night, that we were going to drink in the little fisherman's shack out on the sand and stay in a house surrounded by nets and fishing poles, I was excited.

That night, in the cottage, I lay on the floor watching the only orange light dangling from the roof, sway back and forth. I had been talking too much about all the people who weren't with us anymore, and I promised that no matter what I'd always have a home for my friends who needed it.

Melissa was the first to go out, followed by Steve who was worried about where she went. Pat told me I was a good friend and he said he would go look for the others. And me drunk, with my eyes closed listening to the waves come and go, I could hear the three of them argue about something until I passed out.

I woke up to the same sound as when I fell asleep. I missed the sun come up over the ocean but the sunlight made my head pulse. I stumbled outside, and that's when I saw Melissa lying face down in the sand, the waves coming in and out, not sure whether to take her away or not. There was no sign of Pat or Steve. And their bodies were never found.

A few days later, after a lot of police questioning, I was home. And I had three familiar faces growing on my fingertips.

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I saw a lot of doctors about what was happening to me, and they were all very happy to help. They told me it was becoming more prevalent these days, but it could be sorted out quickly. My relief subsided when they told me how much the surgery would cost. So I decided then that cutting the fingers off myself would be the better option.

Today was supposed to be that day.

My friends always slept late. But I would still have to make it quick. I made sure all my curtains were drawn, so that it was only me and the little bit of the sun that I let see what I was about to do. I took out a cutting board and my sharpest kitchen knife that never gave me any issues when preparing meals. It was a knife that had already cut me so many times, it was bound to take a finger off. I drank something harsh that burnt on the way down and found something hard to bite down on.

My heart was beating faster than I could breathe. I got ready. I put my hand face down so that my friends couldn't see me when I did it. Steve was first. I thought I had come down with enough force, but I stopped as I reached the bone. I screamed. My body jolted. The cold sweat around my scalp was immediate and my stomach heaved.

And from my finger I felt the warmth instantly leave my body. I could smell the ocean air. I could hear the waves. And they were coming from the bleeding Steve. I had cut into a dead man, and he was bleeding something that wasn't blood, but was the last thing he remembered before he had stopped living that night.

I had to take him off completely, so I tried again.

The living are supposed to only have one chance in life. That is why our blood is red. What was dripping out of my finger was wrong and it was heavy and it left my room black wherever it fell. There were two more to go. Outside I could tell the sun was about to go down.

Despite my promise, my friends wouldn't be with me again to see it rise.

Heaven is Too Full for All of Us

Today the sky was very blue. I ran around the green grass with no shoes and jumped and screamed and laughed. All with Daddy's voice. I wanted to try and do a flip or cartwheel like they showed us in class, but Daddy stopped me and said we could get hurt. Not yet. When we were bigger and feeling better and when our arms were the same length again we could try it together.

After dinner I was so full because I ate everything on the plate. Daddy told me he that I had got bigger over the last two days and that I now looked more like him and Mommy. He said I had Mommy's left grey eye. And on the right, my nice brown one looked just like his. He told me he had begged the doctors to make sure that they kept mine in. He told the doctors that there was still too much of him inside, so they put as much of me and Mommy inside him as they could. Then I heard Mommy calling me from somewhere in the house telling me to get ready for bed.

Brushing my teeth was kind of funny because Daddy's right arm was longer than my left, which the doctors had stitched back on. But the doctor said it would grow fast. Daddy joked and said if anybody ever asked me why my arms were different lengths I must just tell them it's because I slept on the one and it forgot to grow. And if they asked me again why I was so tall, it was because I ate for three people.

I climbed by myself into bed in the dark room. I wasn't scared of the dark anymore like I used to be. Because I could always hear them talking inside when they thought I was asleep. Tonight they talked about tomorrow's visit by the doctor. And then everything felt nice and warm and the blanket was heavy so I got sleepy.

***

In a second Sophia was asleep. When I got up from the bed to get a drink of water my wife was still worried about what the doctors were going to say the next day. Marie wasn't as loud as our daughter, but she did have enough control at this point to do her own things when I was moving about. I could feel it even now. My throat was moving and mimicking everything she was saying, my mouth barely opening, with no sound coming out.

"And what if one of us gets lost in here?" she said.

So I reminded her that this was years and years of planning, and that the firm, Autumn's Abbot, wasn't going to let us down now. That even if this was originally meant for just two people it was the only way we could've stayed with Sophia. And if it came to it, then Sophia deserved to be in full control when it was actually our time to go.

When I made it back to bed, I just sat on the edge. I realised how quiet it was. Both of them were probably asleep and not a car was on the road. It took a very long time for me to fall asleep. It was only really in these hours early in the morning that I could properly be by myself.

I dreamed that I was playing outside my old house with a little girl. She was about my age and she had two different colour eyes. We played and argued and did nothing much because we didn't have to do anything because we were just kids. When I woke up the next day there was a light drizzle speckling the window and the wind was rolling heavy over the house. It was happening more and more now, as Sophia was finding her way into my dreams and memories. Marie said the same thing was going on when she was in control.

But since they were still asleep, I got ready for us instead, putting on my favourite black pants, hoodie and boots. I also decided to put on Marie's favourite silver sun and crescent moon earrings. And, for Sophia, I strapped on her favourite blue watch that had a picture from that television show with the dog. I collected our journals and was out the door, waiting for our lift.

I never realised how many churches there were on the drive to the hospital. It made it difficult deciding which one would hold the wake for Marie and I. There were a lot of people who didn't agree with this procedure. Then we passed this one church that caught my attention. The building wasn't too big. They had a large statue of Jesus on a cross, but he was missing an arm. And I knew that was the place.

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I expected the hospital to be warmer.

I wanted all of this to have gone a different way. It was just supposed to be just me and my husband, Trevor. Not for Sophia to be a part of us like this. But this was how it was going to be so that I could see her grow up.

For a second, I sat and breathed just the way Trevor told me to. I never thought somebody else's lungs could feel this different. Being like this felt heavier than I anticipated. It didn't help that the parts that were me and Sophia were getting bigger.

The transplant room was like a brightly lit box. I took a few steps towards the big window at the far end of the room. There was light streaming onto two incubators in the middle of the room. A big grey one. And a small white one. A woman and a child wrapped in bandages were being kept alive by machines with pumps. They were Sophia and I. The bodies where all these parts that were put into Trevor actually came from. And where I think I go back to when I'm not here.

The director of Autumn's Abbott herself, Cynthia, promised me it was all going to work. That no matter what scrutiny her company was subjected to she'd keep us all together. Even if people called them liars, she would help her friends. And she did. It was years of planning to prep Trevor for just me. But here we were now in the same room before Sophia was even born. A family patched together through skin and bone. I started to think about the place I go to when I'm not here. I stared out of a window into the drifting blue and grey outside the hopsital. And then I was far away. In a place where it was just me.

"It's going to be ok, Marie. You and our little girl will live a very long time still. And we can keep going this way for even more years together." Trevor's voice reached out from somewhere.

***

It didn't take my brain that long to catch up anymore. The switching was quicker these days. I straightened my posture and stretched. Marie had a horrible habit of slouching when she got stressed. I also knew when Sophia was in control because she never washed her hands or I'd come back with sore feet from somebody running around barefoot. It was a lot to get used to in only a few months. But it was worth the sacrifice.

After a while Dr Samuels entered, greeting everybody in the room. Dr Samuels seemed to understand that he was a man who didn't stand out unless he wore his gold rimmed glasses. They were the biggest thing on his round face. The check-up ran as usual, with questions about how I was feeling and how the others were doing. I handed him the separate journals we kept.

"The dreams with the little girl? Are you sure they're Sophia?" he asked me while going through the books.

"Yes," I said. I wish I could've given him more proof, brought in my parents to confirm that there was never any other girl growing up with me as a child. But mom and dad were gone.

And my younger brother wasn't around when I was small. I told him Marie could confirm and he said I shouldn't worry, that she wrote about it in her journal too.

He said so many things about my brain trying to figure out who was in control that he lost me. But there was something calming about having all this information. Dr Samuels could sell a circle as a straight line. He told me that what was interesting was that more and more surgeries like ours were becoming successful, even if it was still only a small percentage.

"We could attribute it to science and us just getting better. But let's be honest, it isn't that," he said looking up from his red clipboard. "The organisation the hospital is partnered with, Autumn's Abbott, believes that heaven is getting full. That some people can't just take a number anymore and wait. So they come back home. And we help with that process."

Dr Samuels went on with his check-up amazed at the rate at which the arm that was Sophia's was growing.

"I've seen cases of it never growing and I personally watched one that grew too fast and had to be removed. But your family, Trevor, is impressive. This daughter of yours adapts quickly."

When we were done I followed the doctor down the long white hallway to the elevator. The isolated hum of florescent lights, nurses on the phone and the sound of squeaky wheels and random beeps took me back to when we first visited this place. The time when Sophia was on her way and Marie was already losing sight in her one eye.

We crossed an open room where the lights were dim and there was a voice straining to get out all the sadness coming from within.

"I thought he wanted to stay. We were going to take care of the garden together and watch all flowers grow. It's what he said he wanted," an old woman said.

When I peeked inside the room I saw a small woman sitting by the bright blue window. I couldn't see her face in the shadow but she had a pink and yellow bandana over her head and next to her was a therapist with a clipboard. "He came to me in that dream," the woman said. "Said the sunflowers weren't going to make it out of the ground. And then he left. Shortly after, the hand stopped working, and this eye went blurry."

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Suddenly a strong hand pulled me away from the door. I thought it was maybe one of my parents but then I remembered they were in here with me. I saw Dr Samuels and his big glasses

and I told him I was sorry. That I just wanted to know why the old lady was so sad, she was like me and my family.

“Is that going to happen to me and my mommy and daddy too?”

The doctor’s eyes got big and he started chuckling. I didn’t know what was funny.

“Oh Sophia! I didn’t know it was you,” he said. “How are you doing, dear? Your daddy said you were sleeping so that’s why we didn’t talk earlier.”

I told him my bones hurt less and I wasn’t so scared when people stared at me anymore. He nodded and smiled the whole time, the light bouncing off his glasses. Then I asked him the same question again, a little scared of his answer. But he told me that my family was safe. He said that we were the most “success-filled case” and we were strong. All I had to keep doing was to be happy and keep growing.

Somewhere I could hear somebody calling me.

***

It wasn’t that long after our last hospital trip that the funeral and the cremation were scheduled. We even asked Sophia if she could give us more time alone. We promised we’d do something nice afterwards. She just had to sleep a little longer that day. We didn’t want her to see her body go like this.

It was small and the crematorium felt cramped. There was a red carpet up to the stage where my body and that of Sophia’s was lying behind purple curtains. The room was dim and there were people crying. I feel like I should’ve been crying too, but I was right there. And right there meant fighting to keep Sophia from seeing this. She was like an intrusive thought. And sometimes like a child locked in a room shouting behind a door. She was trying to find out what was going on. But Trevor and I couldn’t give her a chance. At first we had wanted to avoid this all together. But it felt wrong. I wanted to say goodbye even if it was a part of me that fell apart. But now that I was here I could barely concentrate. I could feel my eyelids getting heavier and Sophia’s voice was getting louder –

TREVOR, PLEASE! –

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I remember existing at the back of Sophia's head as a thought to keep waiting. We agreed that every second thought had to be of one of us just to keep our little girl from having to live through this and –

MARIE! SOMETHING! –

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The room had a very high roof with long curtains and I wondered how they took them off to clean them. There were little people but they were all wearing black and were sad. Pictures of me and mommy were on screen so it had to be the day to say goodbye. And I was –

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TREVOR! HERE NOW!

The room was spinning. The way my head spun felt like I was walking through a crowd of people, being bumped and bumped, out of control. I closed my eyes to focus on something empty.

We left for home as soon as it was all over. Nobody seemed like they wanted to come up to us anyways.

For a long time afterwards Sophia was quiet. Trevor and I tried doing her favourite things to catch her attention, but she didn't say a thing. We were scared we had done something wrong. I could feel she was scared, and when I closed my eyes I saw the worried look on her mother's face, and I felt myself slouching like she was.

I explained to Sophia that we weren't angry, we were just worried and thought she wouldn't understand what we had done.

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"But I just wanted to see it. And say goodbye too."

I could feel how quiet Daddy went after I said that. Like he felt bad and I started to worry again. But he told me it was ok and he was sorry too. For the rest of the day they let me play outside. I could hear them talking inside the house, and my arm was big enough now for me to do cartwheels when they were talking. They sounded more and more like my own thoughts, just in their own voices.

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“Sophia, Sophia, it’s Daddy. Can you do me a favour and lift your hand for me?”

But when she lifted her hand, I couldn’t feel it go up. And then I understood what Marie had been feeling. It felt like I was just a face treading dark waters, like the rest of me was submerged, becoming less of me and more of the swaying darkness the deeper the water went. I think Marie was already there but I hoped she could hear what I asked Sophia.

“Sophia, Sophia, you know Daddy and Mommy loves you. Do you love us?”

“Always! That’s why I ask God to protect you and mommy and me. Every day.”

“That’s so nice of you.”

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Daddy went very quiet after that. When I was on the grass sitting looking up at the sky slowly go from pink to black, I thought it was a really warm day for a funeral. All cartoons and movie funerals always happened on grey rainy days with big umbrellas. Today was too nice for that.

I sat there for a long time before I saw how dark it was. Nobody called me to come back into the house and when I sat there and listened, I heard no-one. And for the first time in a long time I was a little scared of being in the dark.

Our Heads Are There to Stop Everything Pouring Out

There's this beach where it never rains. I'm sitting in the sand and R. is standing up so that his face blurs the light. His head is just this smudge that follows him around by his neck. He was born like this. He has no face. He speaks and I hear words that I don't really understand most of the time.

We've known each other forever, and sometimes I don't like talking to him. And I know R. knows that. Maybe I'm just too harsh on people, especially him, but sometimes he stops thinking. There are times when he just gives into himself and his whole body becomes blurry. He makes the worse type of decisions that end up making himself and his girlfriend Alicia cry.

Today the clouds are darker. I see a little boat in the middle of the inky sea and I'm scared for the people on it, because they make me think about my uncle. I stare at them until R. walks in front of me. I can barely guess what's happening to the people on the boat because it's like I'm staring through heat coming off black tar. I see this swirling patch in front of me. R. speaks to me. I can't make out the words but he hasn't been happy with what's been happening to me.

He's making a noise in my head and I'm staring through him, watching that blurry little boat come out the other side behind his head. Then in my mind, I'm seeing this green place with a clear pond and something pretty falls into the water and I know he's talking about Alicia now.

"Well, that's between you and her. Don't worry about me. I don't want to talk about my uncle. He's gone now. He's dead out there," I say, pointing out to the sea, but R. just stands there just looking down at the sand. He doesn't want to look out at the ocean. I stare over him and for the first time I notice the sky is green and yellow. Somewhere up there the sun is trying to remember if it took its flu tablets, and when I come back from this I tell him let's just get out of here.

We're not the only ones on the beach. There are joggers running around in neon orange or green with their dogs following them. There are people running into tall waves and they come back out smiling with surfboards in their hands. What's nice about all these people is that they took off their shoes, because just next to me R. is collecting sand in his white converse. There's a hole in one of them, a spot where I expected more of him to leak out, but I just see sand going in.

My uncle used to joke that when I first arrived at his doorstep, my parents left me there like I was a gift made of porcelain. Him calling me fragile all the time just made me want not to give

anybody else the chance to do the same. To prove that one thing he said about me right. I loved that man, but he didn't need to be right about everything.

I get this picture of that quiet pond again, but this time it's my uncle fishing on a tiny boat, a little ray of sunlight warming his back and his head. It's shining on the khaki-coloured fisherman's hat that I got him, blocking out his face.

At that moment R. changes the topic back to Alicia. In my head I see him describing a nightmare he recently had. Alicia had told him that she saw his head, that black smoke, actually become a face. And she didn't like the face. The face was a man whom she had never seen before and she didn't feel safe.

R. can't cry. He also doesn't realise when he's oversharing, and I just want him to follow me home and be quiet. I've had people tell me to be like him, but there can't be two of us like that. We've become one big cloud ruining people's day.

As we're walking we come across this child building a sandcastle with a yellow plastic spade. The child stares at R. and asks, "What happened to your nose?" The kid's laughing, asking R. if he's stupid. I've got no clue what I would've said to the boy. I look over to check if R. has a face again, but looking through him is the only thing I can do these days.

We get to my Hyundai and R. leans onto the roof. I follow his eyes, and I see us having a little picnic on the bank by the pond. I tell him, "Ah ja, maybe we should get something to eat." And his head wanders toward the water. And suddenly I see flashes of my uncle again, but this time just his dull khaki clothes, reflecting sunlight in the water. No sign of his hat.

R. shakes his head and hands, apologising and I tell him to just forget it. We're taking him straight home.

The drive from Blouberg is a very long one to Kensington. R. plays something peaceful, but scratchy, just like him, I don't think I understand a thing he says. Or more likely, I choose not to.

I see the pictures in my head. A house that misses people living in it. It's this place that feels like it's been sewn together with ghosts and rocks. A blue place where all the windows are open, and the thin curtains want to escape. And I'm the one standing outside.

I tell R. that I will be alright by myself at home, and he needs to stop worrying and pushing the subject.

But then I see it again. My uncle's blue house. Where the windows can't let any light shine out. The front door can no longer fit into the doorframe. And the floors are always covered with an icy layer of water.

Outside in the pond, the boat sways empty over still water.

"You're relentless!" I tell him, leaning back into my seat. Cape Town is flowing past me but it feels like we aren't moving. And R. can't hold it back anymore. That haze rolls over his shoulders like storm clouds coming over Table Mountain. I open my window to let some of him out. I need air.

And as R. leaks into the world, I start to see what he's telling me.

I see the black tar in front of me turn into white sand littered with broken seashells. We are driving past houses now. Some of them have gone completely under the water. Others just have their red roofs and plastic sheets sticking above the deep dark blue. There are people standing on top of their roofs as they float by, fishing.

I spot a little boat, a familiar raincoat and fisherman's hat, weaving in-between all these stranded people. R. and I don't speak but my chest heaves and I wipe away at my wet face. Together we watch all these sailors with no homes float on the ocean towards the same place. And I see my uncle get further and further away.

I Can Only Fit So Many Days Inside You

I found a staircase behind my brother's ribs. One day he just never woke up and we had to bury him because he kept getting too big. But we didn't do a good job because after a few days his toes and his arms began to stick out of the earth. It looked like he was taking a bath in the sand. And then suddenly one day Dad disappeared. But I knew he'd climbed down into my brother so he could cry in the dark. So after a few days of being alone I packed my favourite yellow bag full of food and followed him.

The floor inside my brother's chest was marble, white like his bones, but all smooth and cold. The steps were wide and went deep into a dark place with warm air. I walked until my feet ached and after stopping to finish a can of Pepsi I started to walk again. I didn't like littering inside my brother but I wanted to know how far down it went. I stuck my arm out into the open air far enough to begin worrying about something grabbing me, and then I let the blue and red can slip out of my fingers. The can didn't fall far. It actually landed immediately on another staircase just below mine.

I didn't expect the human body to have so many arches and windows. They were far away in the dark but it was nice to see a roof. The stairs went down to more flat landings where I could peek over the edge, and feel my stomach pull the thoughts from my head.

There were other people in my brother's chest. People I knew from our street. I didn't like them being in here, but what could someone my age do to chase adults away? All I did was hope that they got lost and ended right back outside again. Two of them were my neighbours and they kept talking about my brother and laughing . They greeted me on my way down.

I found a bridge somewhere in my brother's body. It was a long bridge made with bricks and rubbery veins. It had statues of naked people with buildings for heads. There was one I really liked. The statue was of a very big man and his head was full of windows. I took a break to look over the edge of the bridge and I saw flowing water, and I wondered if I could live off what my brother left us down here.

And then I heard something big cry. It sounded like a heavy metal gate scraping across stone and it came from somewhere on the other side of this long bridge. And somehow I knew my Dad had started to cry.

I ran across the bridge and I slipped, falling down into a windy place. The bones in my legs and ribs were sore. I sat up. I took a red and green sweet out of my bag and chewed on it while I looked around. On the wind, little whispers caught my ear. What I thought were more stairs was in fact also people's houses. I walked over to look into one and there was a mother holding her two kids while a dad was talking, and they were praying and thanking God for their new home. The little kids didn't have their eyes closed and they were looking right at me. I waved to them and one waved back. I walked down the smooth street and thought to myself that my brother was a really nice person to have all of this inside him. All these people crawling around inside him like praying ants. And I could hear every tiny voice saying thank you and asking for just a little more. I didn't know what to compare this to, but I thought if this was what God heard every night maybe I'd give him a break and not pray before bed tonight.

Then I heard my Dad whimpering.

I ran down more flights of stairs calling his name. I ran through a few rooms that looked like they belonged to a church. I followed that rumbling sound outside the chapel.

Outside it was very orange, the way the sun shines through skin and you can see veins. Or more like the way those documentaries show babies in their mommy's tummy. It felt like that down here. I was warm and felt that nothing dangerous could follow me in here.

The floor was full of red dust and something was crying close to some big rocks. I peered around them and there I found my Dad scrabbling back and forth on his hands and knees. His black beard was as bushy as his hair. He was practically naked and so huge that I'm sure he could have picked me up with one hand. I became very aware of my neck. I knew that my whole head could fit into his mouth if he wanted to bite it off.

His skin was bulging as if there was no more space for his muscles to grow and his eyes were searching frantically for something. But they were drooping, the way they did whenever he spoke about Mother. For such a gigantic man I felt like I was the one who needed to give him a hug, and that if I didn't he'd go and look for it somewhere else.

I called and called him but he ignored me. I patted him on the shoulder and told him it was time to come home but he chose not look at me. Even with a puffed-up chest and shouting at the top of my lungs, my throat burning, he didn't take any notice and continued crawling around like that.

It was pathetic.

I climbed onto a rock and watched him whimper. I ate a sandwich that had cheese and tomato with a little too much pepper, but it was nice so I offered him a piece. And when he didn't take it I placed it carefully into his giant mouth. I don't think he chewed it at all.

I grabbed onto his beard and climbed up to his ear and shouted. That made him startle. But then he started to crawl again. So I climbed right up his head and onto his back and sat there with crossed arms and legs.

There was a desert inside my brother.

I had no clue how I was going to get my Dad home. So I got bored and jumped down and scolded him some more. I told him that I was going back upstairs and that he needed to as well. What kind of parent was he choosing one child over the other like this and I stomped my way back toward the stairs. Behind me I heard dragging. He wasn't crying anymore and when I reached the steps, I went up a few and turned around to see him with those wide droopy eyes staring at me, his huge face close, the size of my body.

"Let's go," I said.

And we made our way back up. He never spoke. I told him about my journey down here and how I was only scared a few times. We reached the little town with all the praying people but nobody came out to see what was happening. We went over the bridge and up what had to be new staircases, and when I finally reached the top where the hole out of my brother's chest was my Dad picked me up just like a toy and helped me climb through.

"Thanks. Now it's your turn," I said, looking at his giant eye staring up at me from the ground. "Can't you try to squeeze through? The bags under your eye are so big, you need to come home and sleep. I'll make you nice food if you stay with me, then we'll come back here together." Then I noticed my brother beginning to move, his eyes were opening, his head had begun to sway from side to side. And when his eyes opened, my brother and father were both staring at me and for the first time I felt very little.

We Twist and Rot at the Root

A few days ago, my sister and I came home with a man's head. We found him along the road where he was crying in the shade of a tree. Nadine and I felt so sorry for him when he told us how much he missed his family. My grandma told us that the dead who regretted things too much, rotted the quickest. So we decided to help. He had a lot of hair that made it difficult to scoop his head up. Eventually I managed to throw him into my blue school bag and even then thin wisps of hair hung out of the openings and blew in the wind.

I felt great helping the dead to find heaven, but something with blunt teeth gnawed at my stomach the closer we got home.

Right before dinner I found Nadine with her bright orange hair crawling around the floor, her hand swishing under the couch. She told me our guest had escaped. I ran around calling for him. He had told us his name, Gerald. And when we said that he was going to meet our family, I remember how happy he was. I thought about it with a little smile as I was looking for him under our couches with my cheek pressed against the smooth wooden floor.

I heard Nadine clicking her fingers and when I looked up she was a shadow against the drawn curtains that fought to keep out the summer light. She was giggling, holding her arms up high in the air and spinning around as if there were a child in her arms. And in her hands was Gerald. He was a tangle of hair that spilt and twisted down her arms and flowed onto the floor. Hair so long it twined its way around both her ankles.

I could smell the fresh air in our room mixing with something stagnant. Gerald smelled like something that was stored away and forgotten on purpose. And his smell filled my lungs. It settled into my stomach, and I couldn't bring myself to laugh with my sister.

Later, around our black dinner table, space was cleared between Nadine and I for our guest. He told us about the day he died and how he came back. He was a white spot on the table my mom kept eyeing. I even saw tears welling in the corners of her eyes. My dad had the same look he always gave me when listening to my problems. His rectangular glasses were off, he was leaning on large, folded arms, nodding his head as if somebody was confiding in him. Gerald was undeniably calming to look at. The way his head bobbed above all the hair somehow put our minds at ease.

“And when I died, my family shaved off my hair to keep so they could remember me. I remember seeing the dark as stitches, light started breaking through. Until I could see again. But my hair grew and grew. Until my family and I got tangled. Then I couldn’t find them anymore,” Gerald said.

My mother called Nadine and I noble for wanting to help this man find peace. We tried to coax more out of Gerald, but all he would say was that he was waiting for his wife to find him. She could put him back together and then they would move on happy into the next place together.

While everybody was talking to him, I had been doing my best to swat his hair out of my plate. I did so repeatedly until the back of my hand bounced off something soft and cold. I jumped in my seat. But I needed to know what it was and started pushing tufts of his hair aside. I found a very stiff hand. An icy foot. There were many pieces of people. When I tried to pull them out the hair went taut and refused to yield.

I reached further in and felt something warm and ribbed. I slid my finger down what had to be skin, and it moved. I ripped my arm out telling my family there was somebody alive in there. Everybody leapt up, but we didn’t know what to do. My father thought scissors would make a difference, but the process of cutting through Gerald’s thick hair was slow. And the bit he did get through bled something that smelt like a room that had been closed up too long. We left the hair where it was, wrapped around the dining room table. I had lost a shoe to the hair, but the hair was also tied around Nadine’s ankle. My parents started cutting away while she did her best not to panic. But the hair tightened.

I pleaded for Gerald to please stop this. But he ignored me, mumbling about not wanting to be alone.

Eventually, though, nothing else happened to Nadine. She could walk around the house, she could even walk out the door, but there were still thin strands of hair leading from her to the dining room no matter where she went. And she quickly realised how dangerous it was if something closed upon her leash.

Every night my parents bargained with Gerald. Sometimes he barely moved his eyes, and he would cry about the woman he loved and how he missed her. That if she were here, he would never let her go again. And around this time, the time that my parents went to see him to beg him to release Nadine, they found that his hair had grown around them too.

They begged me to leave but I lied telling them I was ensnared just like them. The truth was that I was trying all the time to cut the cords of hair keeping them trapped whenever they were in another room.

One night while doing this I noticed that Gerald's hair had now grown onto the walls of our dining room. It covered the windows, letting only a very little light in. I kept trying to cut my family's binds, but with each slice I realised I was never going to make it. That when Gerald finally did leave, he would go with a new family that would rot away with him.

Each day that passed my family were pulled closer to Gerald. Until a week later they were all stuck in the dining room with him. His hair now covered most of their bodies. My parents sobbed and prayed to Gerald to let them go. That if he let them go we could help him find peace.

But he told us that family was how he felt peace. And we were his family now. And that dying now was a little less lonely.

That night he grew over my dad's head.

I could still hear my dad telling us he was sorry he couldn't do anything as he drowned. I cut and cut as much as I could, until my arms ached. Strangely no hair ever grew around me. What kept me up for days, sawing at the black strands of wire until my hands bled, was the knowledge that I was as afraid as Gerald. Afraid that very soon all the people who were supposed to remember me when I died, were going to be gone.

They Followed the Little Light in Their Eyes

Macy's face fell off. It had been a few weeks now. She didn't know the colour of the day around her, but she could hear. She couldn't taste food, but felt things fall into her. Smell wasn't what she was used to. Her nose was stuck in a place with a lot of nothing, like she was outside at night. Her bed was soft, but the place where her face was had too much wind. Her nose felt cold as the air passed over it like cloth treading over skin. Her eyes, in this other place, couldn't tell the difference between open or closed.

Each day went by with a new doctor visiting but nobody had a clue how the little girl lost her face. Macy's parents did their best to keep family and friends away so that their daughter could recover.

Then one night she felt something moving around in her head. At first she thought her own breathing was echoing. But after holding her breath for as long as she could, she realised that somebody else, not her, was breathing in the dark. But soon she didn't hear the breathing again and she forgot about it.

And then, miraculously, one day her face did grow back. Although it wasn't hers.

It was a face with a little nose. The smile was wide and her teeth were perfect. And pretty brown eyes that never reflected any light. Macy's parents were so in love with this new face that they got rid of all Macy's old pictures with her original face, and they started hanging up new ones which they had quickly taken in different rooms in the house. Friends and neighbours threw a party for this new face.

Macy had never had so many people call her beautiful as these crowds now did. There were people that broke down in tears when they saw her. Strangers behaved as if they needed to feel her skin. They would touch her cheek. Thank her for giving them the chance to be a part of something so wonderful.

There were magazines and television interviews that just had to catch a glimpse of the girl's new face. It even got to the point where the people who loved Macy so much fought and argued with the people who did not believe it was possible that she had grown such a beautiful face. It was difficult to prove because there were no more pictures of who Macy once used to be.

And so when Macy lost her face again, everybody was distraught.

They moaned and wailed and fell upon the floor and held a little funeral for that face that was gone forever. Macy could hear the cries in the street from her room. And it was then that she began to hear somebody walking around in her head again. This lasted a few days. And then it stopped.

And the next day, she had grown another face again.

Soon thereafter a woman pushed through the crowds who had gathered hoping to see Macy's new face. The woman knocked on the front door. She demanded to see Macy. Her parents didn't seem to care who this woman was and just let her in. This woman had dark circles under her eyes. She asked if could she see her daughter again. Macy's parents were confused. But then the woman held up a picture of the exact face that Macy had grown. The woman said she missed her daughter so much and she told Macy's parents that her child hadn't deserve to die the way she did.

Macy's new face had a broken nose and several of her teeth were missing. She had a swollen and bruised eye, and no light shone from her eyes.

Macy could only sit and wait for the face to vanish. And hope that a new and different one would come along.

I Am Full of Broken Eyes

Every day I raised my fingers like a gun, imagining the man's crying face right in front of me, and I pretended to pull the trigger. I started doing it soon after I had that recurring dream where the man with three eyes killed my mother. It was a preparation. Despite my eldest son's embarrassment, I made sure to do it at the parent-teacher meetings. At the park on a relaxing day. On stage when I performed with my orchestra. Even a few minutes after I gave birth to my daughter.

When they were small my kids would copy me. And then ask me why I did it. I think their father had the answer ready even before Lucas, the eldest, was born.

"Your mother was such a big fan of cowboy movies," he told them. "Clint Eastwood? He's just a worse looking version of me."

Everybody in the room would call him out for this lie, but it distracted the kids, and I was grateful. When they were old enough, they'd eventually find out that the man with the third eye killed their grandmother.

The dream always happens on the same grey beach. When I first started having the dream my legs were too small, and I struggled to kick up the white sand as I ran to my mother. And when I looked up at her in the dream, I was scared that the row of dark clouds on the horizon was going to get heavier and fall and wash me away. I needed to get to my mother who stood pointing at a man begging on the wet sand. The water tugged at his clothing, beseeching him to leave with it. As I got older I got closer to him every time I had the dream. This man had a hoarse voice like a grater. When he saw me running toward my mother and him, his third eye on his forehead would fix on me. It was like his head was ready to split. That eye shook and moved wildly as if it wanted to climb out of his skin to see me better.

I had never heard my mother scream at somebody before, especially as there were days when she didn't speak at all. Her light green eyes twitched from the adrenaline. Through all the things playing in my head I figured that this had to be a very bad man to make my mother that scared. I screamed at Lucas that same way one day when I came to fetch him from school. I thought I saw him speaking to this same man. I yelled at this stranger in an uglier voice than I expected to. My throat was even sore afterwards. But then I saw how scared the man was and I realised

that he wasn't who I thought he was. He was too young. His face and his arms were scarred and he had no extra yellow eye in the middle of his forehead.

On the night my mother died, I was thirteen. The begging man in the dream had the gun in his hands and he was pointing it at her head. The difference between this dream, though, and all the previous ones was that it would always end just before the man pulled the trigger.

This time, when he pointed the gun at her, she didn't beg or cry. The man closed his two normal eyes, but the one on his forehead stayed open so that he could see what happened.

The air ripped and popped and all I could do was watch the sand turn red.

In the morning, when I woke up, there were lots of people in uniforms up and down my house asking my father a lot of questions. And he was crying, telling them that he didn't understand what was going on. If my mother had died in her sleep, then why did the medical examination say it was as if she was shot in the head. That there was even a hole, but no entry point.

Nobody really believed this story. Some people called it natural causes, others came up with terrible accusations that aged my father, that made him go grey almost overnight. Despite this he always was there to keep me happy. I would wake up sometimes in the middle of the night to catch him leaving my room, and he would say that he was just checking on me.

My mother's death, so suddenly and so young, at only thirty-two, left many eyes on me. Both the eyes of the living and the dead. People told me I was a lot like my mother. That I was going to grow up to be a great woman one day. They wanted to know what I planned to do in my life. How I was going to make the dead people in our family proud. It was a terrible pressure that I never wanted my kids to experience.

As a teenager, whenever I dreamed of that beach, I'd wake up and look around for that man. Always. One day I noticed that somebody was being chased, so I decided to follow and when I finally caught up to see who it was this time with a gun to the stranger's face, it was a little boy who looked just like me with his light brown eyes.

And there was that man begging on the ground again, with that large eye on his forehead, squinting, almost happy to see me. And the yellow colour in his eye had been replaced by a light green. Just like my mother's.

And every night now since the birth of Lucas, I have found myself doing exactly what my father did. Standing in Lucas' room. Staring. Worrying who he was dreaming about. My

husband would find me standing there, but he never took me away from there. We would talk. I would tell him how scared I was for our children. I didn't want them to grow up in this world with such malignant people out there. When we finally went to bed it was just empty sleep for me.

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One day I was running a bit late to pick up the kids from school. Rebecca was the first one to get in the car. She was singing along to the songs on the radio, but Lucas was standing with a large group of other kids around a man, laughing at his jokes. The man carried the dark green blazer of his suit under his scarred arm. His white sleeves were rolled up and he was making everybody laugh. It was the same young man I had yelled at. He waved then and shouted something that made Lucas laugh. His voice was exactly the same as the begging man's.

Under her breath Rebecca told me that she didn't like him.

"A lot of my friends say they have nightmares about him," she said. It felt as if the car barely moved at all on the way back home. The world around us looked like rolling smoke over the windows. By the time we got home the sun was already lighting the last of the day and I stood on our doorstep watching my kids walk into the house. I stopped my son.

"Lucas. That man – He's Adam's father isn't he? Or is he his brother?"

"Oh him," my son said. "I think he's Adam's cousin. They live together. Adam said he moved in for a bit, to help Adam's dad after Adam's mommy died."

"That's very nice of him," I said. "He must be a very kind person to do that. I can imagine that he must have been hurt growing up."

"I think he got sick one day or somebody did it to him. He makes jokes about it, but the jokes are always about his own mommy. But none of us really understand what he's saying. He just says it really funny, to be honest."

After hearing that, I told Lucas to stop being around that man. Lucas kept apologising, but I said it was okay, he just shouldn't repeat that man's jokes, then I told him I was sorry as well. After dinner I discussed the day with my husband. He teased me for bringing up the subject of the man I had screamed at by the school. The man of my dreams, he called him. I was okay with this. My husband knew how far to go with these jokes in order to keep me grounded, and

where to stop. I told him what Lucas told me earlier. My husband went serious then and started making phone calls to other parents in Lucas's class.

In bed later I clutched the pillow to my chest. I felt I was sinking into my side of the bed. I couldn't stop my brain from flipping through the final images of my mother in my head. The one where her face was broken, red and wet. The other where she slept peacefully in a shiny black coffin in a warm church. It was odd how the image of her in the church still smelt like sea salt. And I wondered if dying in a dream was worse than dying in person. Most people can get away in their dreams, find nicer ones, like the dream of an afterlife. I don't think my mother got away.

My husband switched the lights out and we talked in the dark about a lot of nothing, mainly about what we guessed Rebeccca and Lucas would become one day. I watched the little yellow light from the streetlamps outside break through the curtains and shine across the ceiling. I stuck my hand up in the air. I had the gun ready and my husband made the sound of it going off. He kept me in his arms till we both fell asleep.

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I was back on the beach. I grabbed the gun and pulled it away from Lucas, who was shaking. I had finally caught up after all these years. The man on the ground was thanking me and also trying to crawl away at the same time. I told him to stop. He had fistfuls of wet sand in his hands and looked up at me, his face covered by his dripping black hair. His papery skin looked as if it wanted to tear when he moved. There were round things rolling around under his skin. He stared up at me. His two normal eyes were red from crying and from the cold. But that other eye, the one that split open his forehead, was studying me. It wasn't green like my mother's eye anymore. But it didn't stop moving.

And then I saw that there were many other eyes pushing the one on his forehead out of the way. The dead, all of the dead, were wanting to see what I was going to do next.

I was still holding Lucas in my left arm, and I slowly raised the gun, while pulling him closer.

My chest felt as if it were being pulled back with the tide to somewhere deep in the ocean. All of those sad, sad eyes! *This was somebody's child*, was a thought that kept playing over and over in my head. When I looked into any of those eyes that were now glaring at me, the place that the tide was dragging me away to must have been on fire, because I held the gun steady and squeezed the trigger.

And then I woke up.

I was afraid to go back to bed after that. I reminded my husband how it had ended for my mother. But he held me and reassured me I wasn't like her. That things could end for the better. That these were all just dreams.

And I did dream about that man again. And he did beg. And the ocean roared around us again. And Lucas was again in my arms. And that man on the sand just stared at me. The eyes had broken through his skin. They were all around his neck and down his arms. All these eyes. Because they needed to see what I was going to do next.

I looked Lucas in his face, his face that was just like mine. But he didn't have my eyes anymore.

And I shot that man in his eyes.

We Really liked the Way the House Felt Between Our Teeth

I've been living in this big house in Goodwood with Granma since I started eating the walls. The house is two storeys high and built very skew. Granma told me that when she was a little girl it used to look like a proper house. Then it got bigger and got sick. And when the house started to feel bad, she did too. Eventually she couldn't walk anymore and felt hungry all the time. She warned me that I would soon start getting hungrier and hungrier. And that maybe one day I'd end up eating the walls brick by brick.

My cousin Clara lived upstairs. She played songs on something with thin strings that wanted to snap. Whenever she came down the stairs with her shiny blue dyed hair, she'd ask me how Granma looked. I'd tell her the same thing, "Still like smoke with teeth." Clara would stare at the door with the yellow handle that was lower than all the others in the house. She never noticed, until I pointed it out, that it seemed to sag more every week.

Then Clara would shake off her stare and get back to work, cleaning all the red mould around the house. We lived here because nobody else in our family wanted to. So Clara said that if they sent us money, then she would do her best to help keep the infestation under control until we had saved up enough to get professionals in. My uncle Robert said it would be safer for me to stay somewhere else in the meantime. But I wasn't stupid. I knew that none of them wanted to look after me. And that was fine, because I wanted to look after Granma. Granma always made time to talk with Clara and I, and she gave me my favourite white raincoat. She told us that because it had taken her such a long time to help the house get better, so that she could sell it, the red stuff was inside her now.

And now she was scared of her own teeth.

Clara and I told Granma that we'd keep her safe. I even promised her that I would keep Maroon out of her room as long as I could. Clara hated Granma's dog, but I hoped they'd become friends.

I walked all around, up and down the brown wooden floors and the green carpets looking for Maroon. I could see the red mould twisting out of cracks in the floors. Sometimes where there was a hole in Granma's bluish-purple wallpaper, I would see a strand of the red poking through. It could even be found at the back of the round black and white portraits in the hall.

I was going in circles around the house. Even outside I couldn't find Granma's dog. He didn't come out from under the trees around the house. He didn't crawl out of any spaces underneath our home. He didn't even have a doghouse and Granma said it was that way since she was little, when she had got him as a present. She used to lose him a lot because apparently the house didn't like him. And the sicker and stranger the house became, the fatter Maroon got.

Clara said that was just Granma talking nonsense to tease me.

It was getting late and when the sun was taking all the blue out of the sky, I knew it was time to go inside. I could hear Clara making something in the kitchen past the staircase. I held my breath and tiptoed up the stairs. Clara was a good cook, but these days my stomach didn't rumble anymore for any of the things she made.

I thought I was safe in my room, but with three sharp knocks at the door, which I felt in my chest, Clara shouted: "Jamie, you coming down to eat?"

"No sorry, I had something out of the fridge a while ago, still full," I lied, grinding my teeth together, hoping she wouldn't make me come out of the room to eat. But she just sighed and left. As I pulled back the blue sheets of my bed, I wondered what was actually left in the fridge anymore.

I woke up to a heavy thumping bouncing off the walls of the house. My feet hit the floor even before my blanket, and I was down the stairs to see my canine friend.

I remember now the first I heard him thudding through the halls. It had been just after I'd moved back into the house with Granma and Clara. I had been just about to fall asleep when I thought I heard somebody knocking at my door. I got up, put on my dressing gown and in my bare feet hopped across the wooden floor. That night the doors had seemed so tall and heavy. It had taken both my hands to twist the handle. But when I opened up there was nobody in the passage and the sounds were getting further away. I called out for Clara and Granma, and then something must have heard me because the thumping sound came closer. And from out of the darkness in the passage came this three-legged dog, limping along with a stump. I liked the shiny black in his eyes.

I remember once trying to explain to my other cousin exactly what the dog looked like. He had funny droopy ears, I said, and a small round snout. His fur was red and shiny like the mould that grew under the paint and around the ceiling, but not as bright, and also not as dark as a lot of blood in a glass. My cousin had called the colour maroon and I immediately liked the sound

of it. I told him that's what I'd name the dog. Later Clara told me that I really was Granma's grandchild because she had actually named him Maroon. That made me smile so wide. And for some reason it made me puff my cheeks out and sigh in frustration. If only Granma could walk and run, if only she was my age, we would have so much fun together, especially with how much we thought alike.

I used to like the food that Clara made. It's just that now tomatoes didn't taste as strong as they used to in her spaghetti, and melted cheese snackwiches weren't as much fun as they used to be. Eating these foods now tasted like when I used to put too much water into Oros or Energade. It just tasted like water with small bits of flavour. But that was fine because the house tasted nice.

Maroon loved to bite into spots that had the reddest mould on, but Clara could see where we had been. She didn't blame me or Granma. She didn't want to believe Maroon was doing it because she said a dog's teeth aren't round and blunt like that. So I felt bad seeing the way she looked sadly at me when she saw the damage. And that's when I decided to pick spots around the house that I could hide. Steering Maroon with both my arms around his thick neck I pulled him towards this one big brown cupboard that had a lot of the mould growing behind it. We ate a lot that night. Whatever this stuff was, it made solid things become soft and tasty.

When we were done Maroon would just up and leave, but he always took a route that led to Granma's room. He'd stop and sniff at the door as if he smelled something even nicer. Maroon had funny legs, the front seemed too long for a dog. And I told Clara that his middle part, where his belly was, was where the fur grew the thickest, just like a jacket. I'm sure he knew how to use door handles. I thought the house was even making Granma's door handle lower for him. But he didn't want to use it in front of me. I let him out the front door, but I never knew where he actually managed to come in from.

Once when Granma was painting, I watched her concentrate. Her silver hair was tied into a bun with thin strands that fell into her green eyes. I asked her who she thought knew the house better, her or Maroon . She put her brush down and thought about it, her skin crinkling as she tapped her chin. She filled her lungs with more air than I thought she could possibly take and sighed, "Him. He even knows where exactly to nibble on it without the whole place falling apart on us." And I remember that she had then pointed at her missing foot.

The morning after Maroon and I ate as much as we did, I helped Clara clean the house. I needed to be sure she wouldn't find signs of what I had done. I also liked to keep an eye out for all the

places that a big dog could sneak in. When I got bored of cleaning, I liked to draw the things that I saw around the house and show them to Clara. She found it funny that nothing I drew ever stayed the same shape.

“I draw it like I see it,” I told her.

She always teased me about my drawings of Maroon. She said either his three legs were too long or his snout looked funny. And I told her to stop making fun of the big puppy. I knew she wasn’t a fan of the drawings I made of him, but she really didn’t like it when I tried copying that one painting in the library room.

Granma had this huge painting of some holy woman that she had made. The woman was in silver armour and on her head was a crown of yellow teeth. In the painting the woman was feeding hungry children with one hand, and with the other she was drinking from a black egg. All the food she had given out had red handprints on, but the children were eating it anyway. She looked starved but happy. Her one foot was missing. There were big shadows behind her, but I liked the picture. She almost looked like me. But Clara said it scared her.

No matter how much we cleaned the mould it wouldn’t stay away. There was a lot in Granma’s room. There was some on her clothing in her cupboard. It hid behind her bed and had begun to creep up her favourite wooden chair by the window. Ma barely ate actual food anymore. And one day Clara and I noticed there were chips of paint missing around the window where she sat. I joked about her maybe eating it and how gross it must taste. Clara didn’t find it funny. She looked at me seriously for a few seconds and then left to go upstairs to play her cello. She played the cello because she told me the deep rolling sounds put her at peace like a lullaby.

Clara was one of the few nice people I knew in my family. She let me dress how I wanted to and didn’t bother me too much with what I wanted to be called. I’m sure she’s only seen me once in a dress and never brought it up again, unlike all the other aunties in the family that suffocate me asking when I’ll wear one again, or buy me things I hate the look of. Maybe it’s not the same thing but when I see her mad or scared about something, like just now, I wonder if I really did do something bad.

“Let’s go outside for fresh air,” Granma said, interrupting my thoughts. She wheeled her chair past me, snapping me out of my head. I followed, flexing my arms, because I was going to have to carry her when we reached the back door. On our way there she asked me how her dog was doing, and I said, “Fat”. She giggled and waved her hand, and I saw that some of her

fingers were missing. She was covering her stump with her other hand on her lap. Her arm looked like the tip of a crayon, but it didn't hurt when I poked at it. There were little familiar hairs growing out of it and she told me it wasn't going to be long now, and the house was just going to have to suffer on its own in its last moments. Clara was playing something awful upstairs. The red mould was inside her instrument by now. It was living inside the thin wood walls and changing the sound the strings made. Songs that she played every day were now off and she kept missing notes. At that point Granma was all for wheeling herself out. She couldn't stand the racket. But I told her to give me her arm and I would carry her out. When we got outside I put her down on the grass and she started rubbing the stump of her leg.

I wanted to ask her how it happened. Why both her and Maroon were missing a leg and why they didn't spend so much time together anymore. Like they used to. But then I thought about it for a while and I realised I also wouldn't want to eat my best friend even if it meant keeping them alive just a little bit longer. So we just sat in silence on the green grass, looking at all the ways that the house was leaning wrong.

That night I walked around the house looking for Maroon. It was starting to feel as if it was taking me much longer to make my way around corners and down the passages because the walls seemed to stretch on for so much longer now. When I reached the staircase, I heard the heavy panting of a dog and I ran up the stairs, pulling myself with my hands. I found Maroon right at the top lying in front of Clara's door.

"Have you noticed how bad she's playing now?" I asked him. "She's wa-a-a-ay better than that, you know. I feel really bad for her. Do you think we could help her?"

I knocked on the door.

"Clara, can you let us in? Maroon and I want to help. I think that red mould is in your room too. Maroon can get rid of it for you."

But she didn't open for us. Maybe she was asleep, but still it didn't feel nice to be ignored. When I figured that maybe we should just leave her alone I turned and started walking off. I told Maroon to come along, but he didn't move. I called him silly and then he stopped looking under her door and followed me.

That night we ate parts of the roof in the library room. I stood on a table in front of the painting between two large bookcases that nearly touched the roof. I knocked out pieces of paint from the ceiling with a broom and swept them down to Maroon. Everybody in the house must've

really been deeply asleep not to hear any of that, but the spots where the broom struck the ceiling were actually soft and they came apart easily.

I sat down on the table.

“You must really starve yourself all day to eat like this when you get here, huh, Maroon?”

It was a warm night and all that knocking out of the paint had made me sweat. I rubbed my forehead, and I noticed there was a red smudge on my hand. I quickly pulled the white sleeves of my raincoat up.

“Maroon, do you sweat blood too? I actually don’t think its blood, I think it’s the stuff we’re eating. It just can’t stay inside of us, like it does Granma now. What’s it like to starve I wonder? I’ve been hungry before, but never to the point of that. And since coming here… well … look at this place.” And I threw my hands up, gesturing at the room.

Maroon wasn’t looking at me and I couldn’t see his face. He huffed and got up heavily, and this time I let him leave by himself. I looked out the open window behind me. The moon was large and all the stars around it twinkled. It reminded me of an eye with lots of sparkling tears. I think the moon knew I was looking at it because a cool breeze found its way to me through the window and slipped around my face. It was soft and delicate but came from somewhere so far away that it hurt me to think I couldn’t feel the full thing even if I asked.

For the first time since I got there I thought about my mother and father. And under that blue moon I suddenly felt very little.

Over the next few days, I noticed that Clara was looking funny. I didn’t like how blue her eyes had become. How thin she was becoming. I didn’t like the way her hair shone in the light. At the dining table that night she asked me how Granma was and I told her I didn’t know. We were quiet for a very long time and I realised that it had been a while since anybody had scratched a plate with their fork.

“Aren’t you hungry?” I asked Clara, and she didn’t say anything. Instead she told me I should go play with Granma. So I went to go check on her.

Granma looked like she was going to die any minute and that she would become something very scary soon. I didn’t know what to say, but then Granma said she was starving. I asked her why she couldn’t eat more of the house. She said that it was starting to hurt again, that her teeth were as brittle as the wood of the floor beneath us. She said her joints were turning into door

hinges and her skin was going hard like a rotten stump of a tree. She said that she sat still for too long and that the stuff crawling up the walls, watching us, the red stuff that tasted so lovely, was now growing inside her.

Only when she was done talking did I realise that her remaining hand was missing a finger.

Was the house angry with us for taking too long? It didn't feel like I was becoming a monster. It just felt like I needed to eat. As I left, I asked Granma if she wanted her door open or closed. She said closed was better.

"I don't know if I have the heart to let Clara see me like this," she said.

There was no music that day.

But somewhere I could hear somebody complaining from a tummy ache. Something deep inside the house was hurt, because it sounded like stone grinding against stone. I chased the sound down the halls and up the stairs. I knocked on Clara's door and she opened immediately. Her face was very long and her eyes were watery. Her one eye looked like she had been rubbing it. She didn't say anything. She just stood there looking at me.

"Uhm, Clara, do you hear anything?"

"The house," she replied immediately.

I didn't expect her to answer me so quickly, but then I also wanted to know why she wasn't playing anything. We frowned at one another for a long time. I looked past her to see her cello lying in pieces on the floor.

"Oh – uhm – is the rest in there?" I asked, pointing at her tummy.

She just closed the door slowly in my face without saying anything.

The sound of the house was so much louder now. If a person coughs and sneezes when they're sick then maybe a dying house moves and bangs and rumbles around like a person trying to find a comfy position to sleep in. Was this what it was like to starve with nobody caring for you?

I ran outside to look at the house and I saw that there were big holes in the garden with red wet roots torn out and chewed on. I looked up at the house, and I noticed it was swelling on the right side as if it had a lump. The roof looked loose, and it looked like the windows had forgotten to shine when the sunlight hit them. That's when I realised that it was angry. Angry

that we weren't doing anything fast enough to help it. And so it was hurting Granma and Clara. So I decided that night I was going to bite it just to hurt it. I decided that tonight Maroon and I were going to eat a lot. We were going to bite off so much of its sickness that it would feel better. And when it did, then I'd make it cry in pain, with my teeth.

I called Maroon, shouting that we had work to do that night, and that I hoped he'd bring his appetite. But he didn't appear. Instead from the top of the house, in a window, I spotted blue hair staring at me. Her face was a pale smear behind all the dirt of the window, but I knew Clara was looking at me and that she was very frightened.

That night I sat and waited for my canine friend, but he never came. He didn't thud his way through the halls or try and get into Granma's room. I walked around the house and looked out the windows to see if he was in the garden. Nothing. I wasn't hungry, and for once the house was silent.

In the morning Clara woke me up to tell me that Granma had collapsed on the floor in her room and couldn't get back up. I ran to her room and there on the floor already were the familiar red hairs growing from between the floorboards. As more days passed the walls of the house stretched and swelled. There were new steps going up to the top rooms now. There were soft spots in the walls that felt warm. They looked like the brown circles in a bruised pear. It was becoming difficult to breathe in some of the rooms, they were so stuffy. The roof felt closer than before and none of the doors would lock.

Clara and Granma and I were like small horrible bugs living inside something that was slowly dying. Something that took on the shape of Granma breathed on the floor. It was fluffy like the mould, but also stringy like worms or raw muscles in medical picture books.

The family came over to argue with Clara. They blamed her for taking so long to get the house ready to sell, and that she couldn't take proper care of Granma. They yelled at her but Clara kept asking, "What about us? What about us? Where will we go?" Nobody had any answers.

To get away from all the shouting I went into Granma's room to see if the house had changed its mind and let her go. It was late in the afternoon and the setting sun was turning the sky purple, and the sun made the red thing on the floor look like a large bad bruise. I felt so sorry for Granma but I didn't know what to do. Her bed looked too big to climb onto, the window looked too heavy to lift, even walking back out of the room felt like it would take too long. I held on tighter to my white raincoat.

Maroon was watching me far away from outside the window. I had never been afraid of my friend from the moment we met, but watching that small red dot walk toward me from down the garden, getting bigger with his three-legged hobble, for the first time I thought about how much it would hurt if he bit me. He sat outside the window of Granma's room looking in.

I let him in by the front door.

We ate the red thing on the floor. Pulling apart the wet fuzzy pieces and red stringy pieces. I knew I was taking some of the house's food too. But I didn't care. The mould that looked like veins had made everything very soft. Or maybe I was stronger now. Anyway, we didn't stop. We ate and ate and pulled everything apart. And when Granma was finally gone we left.

Maroon was my dog now, he looked a little funny and he knew that. And the family were scared of him. The adults who had shouted at Clara took their loved ones by their arms and got out as quickly as they could. They shouted things at Maroon. At me. Our mouths were red, as well as our hands. They didn't deserve any of Granma's stuff or to live here in her house. So we chewed up everything. It was a lot to eat, but it was doable because Clara had finally joined us.

We ate all night till there was almost nothing left and we lay down between bits of the roof and the walls. Down in the dirt where the warm yellow sun could reach us. For the first time the air felt clean. There were a few things that we hadn't touched, like my favourite painting by Granma of the lady in silver feeding the sad children. I told Clara I wanted to take the painting to our next home. She was humming that song that she always played on her cello and she said okay I could. She even said that she was impressed with how white my raincoat still was after so much eating, I posed for her just like the saint. And she said that she was no longer afraid of the painting and that she liked it, and that made me jump up and down with delight, which woke up fat Maroon.

And he started to sniff the air.

It Is Difficult to Burn When I Can't Hear You

I bought an old dilapidated house hoping I would meet a ghost. But instead I found a place with too many walls. Every day the rooms in my home grew brighter because the sun kept peering through my windows, calling me. It made me a little scared as with each passing day I heard your voice less. The house had no steps when I bought it, but these days my thighs ache when I find a new flight of stairs taking me into a different corridor where I can barely hear you call. Once I opened a door only to fall into a room filled with boiling water, the floor glowing yellow that hurt to look at. I was scared you would not be able to find me. As the water lapped up to my neck and into my ears, the hot liquid screeched in my head. The room finally let me go and I found my bedroom and hid under the blankets. I never went hungry whenever the house kept me from you, because it wanted to show me a new part of itself, a part where your intensity would leave us alone. I didn't have a choice when it wanted me all to itself. I was scared to make it show me its teeth. Once the house offered me the same room over and again, but every time I entered, there were less things filling its space. A missing cupboard, then a mirror, then a table. The final time I went into that room there was just a chair. And then there was just me. When I opened the door, I expected to be chewed into nothing, without you even knowing anything. The sun was just hanging in the middle of the room. You were so bright and hot and everything around me stretched and receded when I looked at you for too long. I felt as if I stopped being a thing that could form a thought. My body ached and burned, and everything went white until I faded out of my own thoughts with a cry that nobody, not even you, could hear.

THE UNCANNY WITHIN SPECULATIVE FICTION

INTRODUCTION

When I began my speculative fiction short story collection, *Everybody Died on the Shortest Day*, the idea was to write a collection set in Cape Town where grief was physically manifested in the ordinary lives of regular people. Death in these narratives distorts the familiar, and in order to achieve this I used the uncanny to convey the life-altering effects of loss. In this essay I will be using Freud's crucial 1919 study on the uncanny.

The stories are inspired by my own experience of losing many loved ones during the Covid pandemic, especially that of my father, and how this has altered my life. In the stories I wanted to explore how these different emotions were manifested, instead of merely explaining how I felt, as I believe there are things that are best conveyed through imagery. I needed to create something that people could connect with through emotional reaction.

Many stories in this collection explores the idea of "what if?". Like the story about being able to grow the dead back, or how actual homes can get sick. I chose to explore how grief does this through the uncanny, and in this brief reflexive essay I will discuss what I have learned in my own writing.

In Chapter One I will discuss the significance of the uncanny and how it influenced my work. Grief is an umbrella term as it conjures up familiar feelings but far more intensely than a foreign situation, like losing a parent. I believe these familiar but new emotions are best portrayed as the uncanny, which became the ultimate fuel for these stories. In Chapter Two I will discuss why I chose speculative fiction, why I believe it to be the genre best able to express what I want to convey. I will also examine what I believe distinguishes it from science fiction; which is its focus on the ordinary experiences of a character, and how these experiences can be made strange.

CHAPTER 1:

THE UNCANNY

In his 1919 essay entitled "The Uncanny", Sigmund Freud puts forward the idea that when the familiar is made foreign (*unheimlich* in German), this leads to feelings of unease and fear. The same happens, he argues, when the unfamiliar becomes familiar. He states: "We are tempted to conclude that what is 'uncanny' is frightening precisely because it is not known and familiar" (2). The uncanny in itself is not mysterious, but the unease and fear are rather found in the distortion of the familiar and the well known. In the context of the stories I have written for my mini-thesis, the familiar is the routine human emotions that everybody learns about but which they do not often experience. Freud further writes:

> Naturally not everything which is new and unfamiliar is frightening. However; the relation cannot be inverted. We can only say that what is novel can easily become frightening and uncanny; some new things are frightening but not by any means all. Something has to be added to what is novel and unfamiliar to make it uncanny. (2)

Freud explains that not everything new is terrifying, but that does not account for that one new thing that creates unease. This "something", then, is an added, extra element that lies outside of reason, twisting the normal of everyday, comfortable life into the frightening. Relating this to my work, I wanted to explore how life-altering grief can be. How the loss of family members and the removal of familiar comfort affects the dynamic of a household. How one person's absence leaves open a space for something other that is both foreign and familiar to take that person's place, but never be the same.

My story "Growth" was the moment where I figured out how I was going to use the idea of the uncanny, of grief becoming a tangible entity in all my stories. I was inspired by the horror manga author, Junji Ito, specifically his collection of short stories titled, *Tomie* (1987). In his collection, there is a story about an immortal young girl everybody falls in love with and then murders. When she dies, Tomie resurrects and even multiplies in many cases. In a 2019 interview with Ben K., when asked about his inspiration for *Tomie,* Ito stated: "When I was in junior high school, a boy in my class died in a traffic accident. It just felt so odd to me that a classmate who was so full of life should suddenly disappear from the world, and I had the

strange feeling that he would show up again innocently. Ever since then, I wanted to give expression to that feeling in my manga" (Ito interview). This is a feeling I have shared and it is what inspired me to write "Growth". In this instance, the uncanny lies in how it changes what was previously comfortable. As wonderful as it would be to have the dead back it is unnatural. When writing this story, I needed to consider both the positive and the negative aspects of what the uncanny could be doing for the characters. There is an unpredictability in emotions, especially those of grief. Human beings are complex, and it is this that I believe gives the uncanny element in my stories the same erratic feeling.

As I continued to write the stories for the collection I wanted to experiment with even more uncanny and unsettling ideas. In the short story "Heaven is Too Full for Us" I wanted to explore the possibility that people could live in the same body through transplanting limbs onto a single host. This was a story where I struggled to find a logical reason why the dead could live on through this method of transplantation. I played with the idea that there was a special tree that the hospitals were using and a lot of overcomplicated ideas that detracted from the main theme of the story. Throughout my writing course, this has been a key challenge of mine, where I write too many ideas which end up detracting from the core of the story. When I was writing this story, I revisited Kiyoshi Kurosawa's 2001 film, *Kairo,* which is a film about ghosts coming back from the afterlife. The film was a commentary on the rising fear of social isolation. This film had one of the biggest influences on the rationale for why the dead come back in my stories. A character in the movie encounters a ghost that tells him the afterlife was too full. There was no further elaboration, but it was such a simple reason it answered what it needed to, also allowing the audience to fill in the rest of the answer with their imagination.

The reason why Kurosawa's works have been so influential to me is that his characters are often faced with simple invading forces that he labels as "foreignness". These foreign obstacles distort the lives of his characters. In a 2005 interview simply titled, "Kiyoshi Kurosawa" he stated: "Through the injection of that foreignness into their daily lives, they start to see their lives differently and re-evaluate their realities. That's the overall horror that holds my films together." (Kurosawa interview).

This "foreignness" of Kurosawa is for me directly related to the workings of the unfamiliar in Freud's idea of the uncanny. It is how grief and death are given corporeal forms that cause the characters in my works to face what is haunting them. The uncanny elements in my stories did not need real explanations, and this was what actually made them effective. And I needed to

keep this in mind. I needed to remember that there was already sufficient leeway within the rules of the familiar world for it to be transformed for my characters. The uncanny became thus a metaphor for how I could reveal emotions in my collection. Nonetheless, I still struggled to properly implement the formula in many drafts of my stories as I got carried away with my ideas. This issue plagued my writing. A story like, "I Can Only Fit So Many Days Inside of You", went through many rewrites. In one draft that story was about a brother and sister, the latter having to bring her brother's head back to his growing dead body in a town that they wanted to move to. But there were just too many elements to focus on in the story, and these were taking away from the important narrative that I was attempting to convey, which was the feelings of loss the protagonist was working through.

This challenge is still something I face. But now when I think about Kurosawa's quote, I know that I need to write by asking myself what that one main "foreignness" is that is plaguing my narrator. What is it that they need to face and resolve? Instead of trying to force a commentary on many different topics in a short story, I need to focus on one main idea in order to write a good story. Good writing demonstrates critical narrative focus and control and this is why short stories are a great way of honing one's writing abilities.

CHAPTER 2:

SPECULATIVE FICTION

When deciding how to approach the topic for my creative writing mini-thesis, I wanted to understand what inspired me in authors across different genres, such as horror and science fiction. Marek Oziewics, when exploring what speculative fiction is in his article "Speculative Fiction", defines it as a "super category that houses all non-mimetic genres—genres that in one way or another depart from imitating consensus reality—from fantasy, science fiction, and horror to their derivatives, hybrids, and cognate genres, including the gothic… A collection of genres and culturally situated practices" (1). Speculative fiction uses everyday life as a foundation, but employs elements of unreality from different subgenres like horror in order to transform its narrative capabilities. Speculative fiction thus is not worried about capturing or representing reality, but it is more concerned about what it can say through altering this reality. Ozwics writes:

> The term "speculative fiction" has three historically located meanings: a subgenre of science fiction that deals with human rather than technological problems, a genre distinct from and opposite to science fiction in its exclusive focus on possible futures, and a super category for all genres that deliberately depart from imitating "consensus reality" of everyday experience. (1)

This is where the link between the uncanny and speculative fiction works so well. The foreboding nature of the uncanny alters the idea of the homely and the familiar, what readers are used to in their everyday lives. They are then forced to face an uncomfortable topic of their own personal futures.

Margaret Atwood wrote that "speculative fiction is literature that deals with possibilities in a society which have not yet been enacted but are latent" (24). The genre experiments with revealing the familiar in impossible seeming futures. Not the unknown futures of science fiction's technology and aliens, but what society instead could evolve into if certain social aspects of being human are not addressed. The genre bridges the uncomfortable gap between the now and what could happen by altering the familiar within the present. Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) does exactly this with its examination of fertility and gender in a

dystopian America. But the genre can also be used to give voice to a person's internal struggles of just existing. Franz Kafka's surrealist *Metamorphosis* (1915) is a deeply private but terrifying view of a man's spiralling depression and social isolation, leading to his eventual death.

The stories in my own collection are a combination of these two approaches toward society and the individual. The drafts I wrote were at their worst when the focus was more on how the uncanny worked, as in explanations, rather than what the central character was experiencing.

To achieve the above, I first needed to figure out how to craft these stories and what was most vital to capturing their essence. When planning pieces I always attempted to follow the advice of speculative fiction author, Michael Moorcock, in an interview in *The Guardian* simply entitled: "Michael Moorcock's rules for writers". In this interview Moorcock described his formula for writing successful stories. His point on the introduction of a story is one I still follow: "Introduce your main characters and themes in the first third of your novel. If you are writing a plot-driven genre novel make sure all your major themes/plot elements are introduced in the first third, which you can call the introduction" (Moorcock).

When adapting Moorcock's ideas to my short stories I decided that all exposition needed to be introduced within the first two to three paragraphs. The uncanny needed to be introduced at the same time as I introduce the main characters as it was going to be what drove them and established the fictional world for the readers. The element of the uncanny within my collection was an active and tangible part of these stories, just like the characters. Introducing any further characters or complicating plot threads after the first three paragraphs would just weigh the narrative down, taking away from the main theme I was attempting to convey. This was evident in my story, "Our Heads Are There to Stop Everything Pouring Out". In a very early draft the character R. had a sister who was introduced about five paragraphs into the story. I realised her presence took focus away from the already established friendship between R. and the narrator. R. was already the uncanny element of the story. What needed to be present was the difficulty the characters experienced when trying to communicate with one another. The focus needed to remain between the two friends working through grief in a limited amount of pages.

That is what drove my search for what was necessary and sufficient in portraying the effects of the uncanny in my speculative stories. I needed to carefully consider my approach to crafting a story within this diverse super-genre. And this is why I extensively read many stories that belonged to the sub-genres, and analysed the advice of different authors. In an interview with

The London Magazine, the Argentinian horror author, Mariana Enriquez, discussed the qualities of this particular genre:

> In horror, it's different because what you have to keep in mind is how much explanation you get. Not enough explanation: it looks lazy. Too much explanation: it's boring. Where you are walking is very narrow. In general— because there's not one answer to this— in general, I skin it until I reach the core of what scares me about it. (Enriquez)

Finding the balance between explanation and preserving the energy of a short story is difficult but rewarding. Many of the stories I have written have gone through rewrite after rewrite, and were quite different from the first conceptualisation. When Enriquez speaks about the core of what scares her, I needed to remember what I was trying to essentially say with each of my individual pieces. Finding the core of what type of feeling was driving my story was important to understanding its particular uncanny element. This made me understand that I needed to be meticulous in my choice of word and tone. In an interview with *Public Books*, Science Fiction and Fantasy author, Ursula K. Le Guin stated:

> I'm very strong on accuracy and exactitude. You can't describe everything— that would be very boring. With an invented world, though, you have to describe more than a realist does. Of course, you have to leave out an enormous amount, too, and the leaving-out is half the art. There the reader is free to supply whatever they want to supply, to fill in all those white spaces that you leave. (Le Guin)

This quote is important to my writing as I believe it explains how I attempted to handle the surrealist elements of my stories. I needed to be precise in what I wanted my readers to see, but not hold their hands until I reached the answer that I wanted them to find. Being overly led me to recycling the same images in my stories and caused a drop in quality. Adapting what Le Guin stated about exactitude helped challenge me to write in a much simpler, though precise, style.

Because speculative fiction was a "supergenre", according to Ozwics, which contained a range of sub genres, I allowed myself a lot of room to test different literary devices, such as symbolism and metaphors. The Canadian author of speculative fiction, Ai Jiang, is someone whose unique crafting of their fictional world, influenced me deeply. In a 2023 interview she discusses her novel, *Linghun* (2023), a story where grieving families move to a neighbourhood

called HOME. This neighbourhood is inexplicably able to conjure dead relatives back to life. Jiang spoke specifically about the role of metaphor in her writing:

> I tend to think of everything in metaphor, and HOME is very much a metaphor and physical manifestation of the feelings of grief and loss experienced by those who reside within its homes and also those who come seeking for a home in this town. Much like grief itself, HOME is both mysterious and inexplicable. Sometimes, when we ask someone who is mourning why they can't let go or move on, there might not be an answer; HOME is the same in its existence, its persistence, its meaning as a whole and for its residents. (Ai Jiang)

This idea has been very important for me. It taught me two vital things: one, that what often makes sense to me as the author is not always clear to the reader; and two, the uncanny, which Jiang has helped me understand as the metaphor, is the familiar yet scarily new state which the characters must live in. Metaphors are one of speculative fiction's strongest tools. So I could now express the feeling of loss of my charcters more evocatively with readers through imagery. When I think of this, I am drawn back to how Kafka portrayed Gregor Samsa as a bug in his story, *Metamorphosis*, a metaphor for his dehumanisation. Just as Jiang evokes grief as "mysterious" through metaphor and symbolism, I believe it is through the feelings an author conveys that allows speculative fiction to better connect with individuals. People may not share the same specific grief, but the feelings that human beings undergo through mourning are more relatable when they are triggered through metaphors of grief of the familiar.

Ghosts are one such familiar metaphor in literature. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet,* the titular main character witnesses the ghost of his father who longs for justice for his murder. The ghosts that appear in Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) became a metaphor for past regrets that haunt the living. When discussing ghosts from different cultural settings, Kiyoshi Kurosawa distinguishes between Western and Japanese interpretations of ghosts in fiction, and argues that the latter are less aggressive, which then conversely makes them more frightening: "But if they don't attack you then the best you can do is figure out a way to co-exist with them. I find the idea that one just has to live with this thing much more terrifying. You have no chances of running away or fighting it; you're stuck with it forever" (Kurosawa).

At their core ghosts, from across the world, are familiar vessels for expressing lingering regrets to the living. Whether they are aggressive or not there are recognisable traits in the metaphor. My writing was able to operate within the familiar trope of haunting and the undead. I did not

need to spend a lot of time explaining to the reader what a ghost was or how it operated or even whether they were real or not. I just needed to properly capture the effective emotional response within this uncanny metaphor.

The reason why speculative fiction was so appealing to me as an author was because it allowed me to work with unfamiliar tools to channel my own take on familiar topics. I was then able to write my own cautionary tales for those who were grieving like me. I could thus express my own ghosts, resurrected through my experiences of grief.

CONCLUSION

As I wrote my stories, I always kept in mind the quote from Kafka about overwhelming feelings that cannot be expressed in words. This appears in his collection of letters, *Letters to Milena* (1952). He states:

> I keep trying to convey something which cannot be conveyed, to explain something which cannot be explained, something in my bones, which can only be experienced in these same bones. In essence it may be nothing more than that fear we have already discussed so often, but extended to everything, fear of the greatest things as well as the smallest, fear, convulsive fear of pronouncing a single word. On the other hand, maybe this fear isn't simply fear, but also longing for something greater than anything that can inspire fear. (188)

In my stories the uncanny always ends up changing the characters whether it is for the best or not. The characters in my stories, in a similar way to Kafka, cannot fully express their feelings in words, so the uncanny does it for them. And I believe that speculative fiction operates best on this human and personal level, giving words to a daunting feelings. Stories thus become a warning for readers to reconsider their own situations in life.

I must return to Kafka once more in concluding. In his book *Letters to Friends, Family and Editors* he states, "A book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us" (25). This frozen sea Kafka describes is a stagnation, a build-up of feelings inside a person that eventually makes them sick. Speculative fiction allows readers the opportunity to approach this stagnation and find a solution for it. There is a cathartic nature to both reading and writing within this genre. It allows the imagination to travel at a safe yet dauntingly personal distance from this frozen sea. It encourages readers to go beyond the warning signs and to possibly change for the better. Yet in order to achieve this the fiction must be personal and moving.

The uncanny and speculative fiction complement one another. Familiar life is made into a foreboding metaphor for readers. I believe that because speculative fiction operates as a "super-genre" it allows stories to reach a wider audience, letting more people connect with the human experience of processing emotions and trauma. It certainly enabled me to explore my own personal grief, through the blending of literary genres, and so to act as a warning about the dangerous aspects of missing a loved one.

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