

Fiction:

***Betwixt***

and

Mini dissertation:

**Antiheroes - characters we hate to love:**

a study of the deviant protagonist

in Chuck Palahniuk's *Choke*

by

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I herewith declare that

**Betwixt**

And

**Antiheroes - characters we hate to love**

are both my own work and that all the sources I have used have been acknowledged  
by means of complete references.



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## Abstract

It has been a long-held belief in literary scholarship that identification with a fictional character is evoked by the extent to which a reader considers him or herself *similar* to that character. This is especially true if a character is considered "good", which implies that the character holds and acts upon the same norms and values upheld by the reader. This, however, fails to explain the phenomenal popularity in recent years of that morally dubious protagonist, the antihero.

The belief that a shared morality is necessary for identification is ubiquitous in the field of identification theory, an academic endeavour focusing on understanding reader and audience engagement with fiction. The key focus of the scholarly part of this dissertation is to find answers to the popularity of the antihero within the text and consider it against the broader backdrop of individual and societal morality. It does so by employing the tools put forward by identification theory, in this case, a linguistic cues framework that seeks to identify textual drivers that foster identification between reader and protagonist.

In order to personify the "antihero" for the purposes of this study, I turn to author Chuck Palahniuk who is famous for his deviant characters and the almost cult-like status they achieve. At the centre of the study is the literary character, Victor Mancini, from the novel *Choke*, by Palahniuk. Another factor that makes Palahniuk's writing suitable for textual analysis is his transgressive writing style, a style lauded by some and dismissed by others.

Using the linguistic cues framework, I strive to identify and isolate Palahniuk's devices and linguistic structures in his construction of Mancini. This is done along six dimensions: spatiotemporal, perspective, moral, cognitive, emotional, and embodied.

The fiction part of the dissertation, titled *Betwixt*, puts some of the findings from the scholarly section into action. The main character, Leda, starts out as a cowardly individual with questionable morals who spends her life trying to escape the legacy of a chaotic

childhood. Her escape, however, comes in a form she would never have expected. The fiction attempts to blend the realistic world with the supernatural one - both being complex, layered and rather messy. We follow Leda's hero-journey, meet lovers, dysfunctional family members and other characters who shape Leda through their interactions. The litmus test being, can she find purchase in the hearts of readers despite her many moral failings?

# CONTENT

<b>FICTION:</b> .....	<b>6</b>
Betwixt .....	6
.....	158
<b>MINI-DISSERTATION:</b> .....	<b>159</b>
Antiheroes - characters we hate to love: .....	159
CHAPTER 1 .....	160
Introduction.....	160
CHAPTER 2 .....	163
Locating the antihero.....	163
CHAPTER 3 .....	171
Meet Chuck Palahniuk .....	171
CHAPTER 4 .....	177
A textual analysis: Man of many words .....	177
CHAPTER 5 .....	213
Conclusion .....	213
Works cited .....	216

# FICTION:

## Betwixt

It's crazy how one minute you're living the neatly packed, stacked and vacuum-sealed life you've designed for yourself, and the next you're discovering worlds under the skin of this one, fleeing unspeakable evil, couch surfing at a clown's while carrying an unlikely snowstorm in your pocket. Life is weird that way. Ask Leda, she knows.

# CHAPTER 1

## “Betwixt the world destroyed and world restored ....”

The day was always going to be strange.

After all, she’s standing outside the offices of the suit-and-sneaker-wearing overlords of advertising, about to beg for her job back.

But just *how* strange she could never have imagined. Because before the day was out, every “truth” she’d ever taken as read, things like gravity and tides and matter, would be mere possibilities at best.

Standing at street level, she stares up at the building that looks more like a collision of chrome, concrete and glass than a building in the Northern suburbs of Johannesburg. The agency’s name, *Sax & Ash*, protrudes from the stormy-grey wall that leers into the sky like Jacob’s Ladder *sans* the angels.

It’s just an elevator ride up, but it may well be the *Great Trek* over the *Drakensberg*. She dreads the fight that lies ahead. She loathes conflict. She’d rather placate her demons, coddle them until they’re fat, ungrateful adult offspring intent on never leaving the house.

This, however, is one confrontation she can’t avoid. Her job is everything. She loves it if merely because it’s so routine, predictable like the fixed metrical ticks of a metronome. Days have the same spectral density, the same probability distribution as the drone of the aircon, the tap-tap-tap of fingers on keyboards and the awkwardly intense chatter of the red-headed corporate Quasimodo at the standing desk opposite hers.

And that’s the way she likes it.

It gives her a sense of things. A place to go. A way to be.

This hardon for order is a symptom of her wildly erratic childhood. One with ice-cream for breakfasts and sugary cereal that turns the milk pink for supper; of living in cars and learning seven-card stud instead of algebra. The closest Leda ever got to a “normal” family was when she played the baby Jesus in *The Christmas Story, a Drag Show*.

To be fair, she has also come to love the wonderful world of advertising for what it is. There are the obvious perks – late nights and big ideas are remunerated with awards and

wicked cold cash. The local dope dealer accepts bitcoin and hand delivers designer stock in sheaths of sheer paper. But it is more than that. A simplicity. Advertising flattens the human condition into basic, digestible needs – fear, happiness, anger, sadness, disgust, desire – sure, it’s nihilistic, but at least it offers some insight into the chaos that is other people. It reveals the mysterious mainspring that causes the clock to tick. It lets you know the wizard behind the curtain’s just some short shit with his dick in his hand.

With this blueprint, you can sell a dream in the form of toothpaste. A promise in the shape of a weight loss wonder. Bogroll can become the last vestige of hope. Knowing this, you can convince people that money, prestige, respect, pussy, your father’s love will be yours if only you’d buy this car, this face wash, this suit, these sneakers.

To prepare for this confrontation, she had rehearsed her prostration the night before, formulated her defence. But, of course, the big nut to crack was the director, Suzanne, who was eight months pregnant with the baby of the man Leda had fucked at the office party. And while hedonism was as encouraged as good communal fridge etiquette, the one taboo at the agency seemed to be sleeping with the boss’s baby-daddy.

So, in the early hours of this morning, the light outside tinged cerulean around the edges, she lay listening to Mrs McInnes’s cat - from-two-doors-down - meowling forlornly inside its Biggy Best prison.

As sleep had clearly deserted her, she got up and compiled a playlist to accompany the supplication scheduled for the day. For in the age of media, you can tell the moment from the music. Every life-defining event needs a soundtrack. It is to the swell of full-scale orchestral sounds that lovers are reunited, wars are won, or twists are revealed. A lone French horn announces the forlorn cowboy. The masked avenger swings into action to the raging crescendo of Danny Elfman. Two notes repeated on a tuba warn of the danger from the deep blue sea. Besides, what is a kiss if it’s not underscored by a song?

So, when it was eventually time to rise and face the music this morning, the first thing Leda did was press PLAY. And as *sturm und drang* careened through the speakers, she donned a no-nonsense designer suit so severe it gave her the appearance of being made up of all oblique planes. The corset underneath amplified the severity of the look. The shoes, Stella Marsh. The bag, Louis Vuitton.

She'd be hard-pressed to admit it, but she’s tightlacing again. Her corsets are significantly tighter lately, and she’s been toying with the idea of having ribs removed for a



tighter fit. To her, corsets aren't so much about the pursuit of an impossible figure. It's more self-preservation. Like armour. Like the coal-black eyeliner she wears as a barrier between her and the world.

Now here, standing at street level, Leda looks up at the building. It towers over her like a monument to her failures and disappointments. Around her, the street is a blur with motion. Minions to the *métier* scurry about the smart city with their smartphones and their smart suits, chasing their SMART goals while neglecting their smart foods.

She's just about to take the leap when a figure blocks her path. She smells him before she sees him, a waft of spray paint and street living.

Aerosol.

He's a familiar sight in the city, his strange shuffling gait, the tell-tale rattle of a spray paint can at his side, as much a fixture of Johannesburg as the overcrowded minibus taxis and the labyrinth of one-way streets. He's just always been here. Walking the streets, muttering nonsense and leaving his mark on walls and in alleys in electric blue, silver, red paint. And the subject is always the same, a hastily drawn outline of a person with looping scribbles inside it. The one Leda saw last week was accompanied by the word *liminal*.

Leda clenches her teeth. She does not have the time or the stomach for this.

"Green," he says, peering into her face, a fine spray of spittle almost hitting her cheek.

"Hello, Aerosol," she says and pulls her head further out of spittle range.

"I think ... you're green with a touch of purple all *grisseling* through it. Am I right.

*Domkop? Amiriiiight?*"

"Sure," says Leda. Everyone knows that old Aerosol will become distracted and move on if you stand still for long enough.

"I can't go there, you see. Not anymore ..." rattle-rattle, then a quick huff from the nozzle. "If I could," he continues, "that would be a hoot-toot-toot! Ja, for sure it would, domkop."

"Ahuh," says Leda, just trying to muscle through the distraction.

"It's the tin you see, sir ..." he knocks twice on his head then on one hip, "... this earth body is made to break," he shakes his head, "not like there ...." The dirt-caked face falls as if a memory had hit him like a brick. "And tin doesn't travel well ...."

"Mm-uh," Leda says.

He starts swiping at his head as if a bee is buzzing around inside it, Leda all but forgotten. When he speaks again, it's to no one in particular.

“But I'll go back someday, *domkop*. Tin or no tin. You'll see. I'll just go.”

With his distinctive shuffle and a faint rattle, old Aerosol wanders on down the sidewalk as if failure and musky old secrets merged to make a man.

Leda watches the old man shuffling off. For a moment, he becomes her father, or what her father may become. Or what she may become. What anyone may become if the stars or the planets or the lineage or the luck, or whatever it is that decides your fate, don't align.

She shakes the thought from her head, cranes her neck to look up at the monolith that is her *here and now*.

The time has come. She cannot delay the confrontation any longer. She takes a deep breath, draws the headphones around her head, and presses play.

First, a dark, brooding silence in her ear.

A wah-wah guitar riff starts to loop.

Menacing drumbeats.

A synthesiser wails like a vengeful ghost. *Hey! Hey! Hey!*

*I'm the trouble starter, punkin' instigator.* The Prodigy screams in her ear. *I'm the fear addicted; danger illustrated. I'm the fire starter, twisted fire starter.*

She had chosen the song ironically. She's no fire starter. She is more a simmer than a sear, really. She pretended to be vegan for a year just because the tea lady wore a button on her blouse that said *Cows are people too*.

But, every so now and again, like a boiling pot, she too has to let off steam. And at those times, she's given to impulsive bouts of trouble, like a wind trapped behind the coccyx that is suddenly released. Hence an illicit affair and now, a sort of career *hara-kiri* that may well end with her dignity strewn on the high-gloss floor.

Leda wills her feet into action, the automatic doors part like curtains on opening night. And on a sea of synth and snarling vocals, she steps into the building.

Inside it is cool. The cruel sophistication of the place suits the chill. She autopilots past the reception couches that arch and lurch across the epoxy-finished floors more like performance art than functional furniture.

The music takes her past the front desk. The receptionist with the parallax hairdo is playing Solitaire and doesn't look up. On the television screen behind her, the news is showing a city under siege by a small group of protesters.

*Hey! Hey! Hey!*

Leda presses the elevator button as if it's a slot machine, desperately wishing it to be empty when it arrives. The last thing she needs is to be trapped in a box with an ex-colleague. The unspoken questions, the pitying glances ... She couldn't bear it. The word "pariah" jumps into her head. She's never liked the word, the sound of it. Pariah. *Puhriha. Masticate*, another word she hates. *Wiener. Ugh. Gelatinous. Yuck.*

*Lines*, on the other hand, she's always liked the word *lines*. It sounds like a short song. Other words she likes, *tertiary, panakota, pa-na-ko-ta! Liminal. Thud, emancipate.*

Miraculously, when the lift arrives, it's empty. She steps in and silently awaits her deliverance to the top floor. She avoids eye contact with her reflection in the mirror, just in case she comes to her senses and aborts the mission.

The elevator comes to a stop. She wades through the part of the building where the admin grunts work. Here the *feng shui* speaks of thankless tasks, supermarket brand perfume and comfortable shoes. High wooden shelves creak under the weight of pointless paperwork, copyright clauses and disclaimers that no one will ever read.

Of course, by now, her arrival has taken centre stage, the disgraced prodigy has returned. Like Hungry-Hungry Hippos, they pop up from behind cubicles, around corners and desks. They're all hoping for a scene. For drama.

She hasn't seen anyone from work since things went down. She supposes she can't blame them; rats rarely *board* a sinking ship. But thanks to her social media stalking, she knows everything about everyone: *Lerato Njobe is fresh from a holiday in the Caribbean.*

*Alida Riley's sister had a baby. A boy, but they're thinking of raising it gender-neutral.*

*Jobe Cullinsky had a miso bagel at the Bagel Bar.*

*Takalane Moyo's relationship isn't complicated anymore.*

*Rest in Peace, Mr Otto Von Longdog*, the obit for Sue Middledy's wirehead dachshund had read.

She feels the scarlet letter searing into her flesh. The urge to bolt wells up, but she stays on course. *Keep your head in the game.* In her ears, the late Keith Flint is still yelling about starting fires.

She walks past portraits of dead executives and pictures of other people's cats. *Hang in there, little buddy* reads one poster featuring a kitten clinging to a branch. But the deeper she ventures into the belly of the beast, the more her bravado starts to wane.

Then she's in the studio where the creatives spin their gold among Rubik's cubes and man-sized chess pieces. Here her former teammates and sometimes-friends ogle her like a dropdown menu on *PorhHub*, unsure of what perversion is to be had today. They shift in their ergonomic kneeling chairs like a Jerry Springer audience anticipating boobs at the very least.

Then up ahead, exiting a glass box is a group of executives. Among them, dressed in a particularly audacious suit even for him and Buddy Holly glasses, is Decher Holt the Third.

To her own horror, Leda's heart lurches at the sight of him. She loves him, she hates him, she loves him, she hates him, her heart oscillates. But then again, pain and pleasure call on the same neural circuitry.

Leda had been enamoured with the man from the first day. She's always been a fool for beauty. And besides the perfect symmetry of his face, he exudes a sense of unaffected aloofness, stalking the corridors like a jungle cat with a stealth that belies the power beneath the machine. And when that jungle cat sees you, you *know* you've been seen.

And one day, he saw Leda.

So, when he started offering her stolen moments, breadcrumbs from his artist's hands, it had made her feel special. Important. Every word from his quick tongue seemed special and unique. The aching understanding that theirs was a love doomed only added to the appeal.

She slides her earphones off her head. The cacophony of comfort fades until it's just a tinny clamour around her neck.

She watches them for a moment. Decher Holt, ex-lover, ex-boss, laughing and joking without a care. Of course, the tango had taken two, but only she faced the music, a sacrifice to appease the God of domesticity. And in a way, she understood that her blood was meant to obfuscate the cracks in a marriage that wasn't working, hadn't been for years.

Leda feels the heat rising in her cheeks.

*Who is the fire starter?*

She straightens her back just a little.

Tilts her chin a tad.

She finds comfort in the tightness of the corset cutting into the flesh beneath her breasts.

It's just bluster summoned from her humiliation, but Leda focuses in on the group. The executives' jaws drop as they become aware of her. Decher makes himself thin behind the rotund body of the HR director. The deathly silence that had washed over the rest of the office now crashes up against them like a wave, and they stand frozen in the spotlight.

Leda feels her confidence surge. This is way past the point of no return. Her tread is steady, and so is her gaze. She squares her shoulders and steps towards them decisively.

But her shoe catches, and she starts to fall —.

Time slows.

The world dims.

Her inelegant screech sounds through the moment like an echo through time. And as the glass pane approaches her face, all she can do is brace for impact.

But the impact doesn't come.

Instead, she continues to fall.

Falling and falling and falling until she's fallen through the floor and into some alternative version of the space she'd occupied moments before. Her wish that the ground would swallow her had come true. Somehow, somewhere, the quantum wave function must have collapsed ...

Then the free-fall is over, and she is standing upright again as if by some self-righting mechanism. Or perhaps what it means to stand upright has shifted, she can't tell. But looking about, she realises that the mechanics of up and down is now the very least of her problems.

This is somewhere else. No, somewhere ... different.

Her awe defuses her fear. She just stands there.

She has the eerie sensation that she is under the skin of space and time. Some liminal space, so alien yet strangely familiar.

Instinctively she knows that she's teetering on the very edge of some universal truth. Somewhere ancient, primordial. Somewhere sublime. Somewhere grotesque. Is this the ethereal plane? Is she dead?

What she sees is this: she's still inside the *Sax & Ash Advertising Emporium* offices — there are the bookshelves, the plaques on the walls, tables, chairs — except all of it is made up of ethereal blues and whites. What was solid is now translucent. Like deep-sea jellies.

Phones, desks, chairs, and books seem made from fine chiffon. Although barely more than a gossamer sheet, the glass door she should have collided with is still discernible. She reaches out, and her hand passes right through, the glass offering no resistance.

Even the executives, who'd erupted in pandemonium at her disappearance, are diaphanous shapes of themselves, except within each one of them, there seems to be a luminous whirling miasma, some of it escaping their bodies like smoky tendrils from a fire.

The smoky substance is hypnotic. It seems to be made up of a million colours that shift and shimmer and change shape like shadows in Plato's cave.

While doing research for a suntan lotion campaign, she'd learned that the human body emits light, pretty much all living creatures do. She wonders if this is the source?

She is also aware, albeit distractedly, that her clothes had not made the journey with her. And that they now lie in a heap at the feet of some very confused executive types.

It's only when her former bosses rush forward and through her that latent bewilderment overtakes the awe, and she starts to run in a blind panic. She doesn't know where to yet, but she has to get out, away!

She takes the stairs two by two, discovering that here physics is fickle, the ground, buoyant, as if running on a non-Newtonian surface, giving way, bouncing back. The sensation is so strange that, at times, she isn't sure whether she is falling or flying.

She rounds a corner just as Ismael from accounting – in the same ghostly blue guise as the executives - steps unwittingly into her trajectory. She frantically tries to prevent a collision but passes right through him and his whirling miasmas as if they're dust. He seems to not be aware of her at all, except ... for the briefest of moments, he pauses and gives a slight shudder.

Leda discovers that she is running to the basement parking where she used to park, or at least to the phantom version. She's also aware of something else: a growing tightness in her chest as if running out of air. And, indeed, soon she is gasping, trying to fill her lungs but nothing-! By the time she reaches the bottom of the basement steps, it feels as if her chest will explode, and she burst from the blue plane back into the regular one.

Gulping mouthfuls of air, she presses her back against a red-bricked pillar and heaves until her breath is restored. She opens one eye. Normal. Everything is sane again. The world is as it is and always was. This is just the dank-smelling basement packed with cars patiently waiting for home time.

*Unfathomable.* She's always liked that word.

For a solid few seconds, she doesn't move. She just stands there, feeling her breathing and listening to the tap, tap, tap of a leaky pipe somewhere in the dark.

Just as Leda exits the mysterious blue world, the building janitor is taking a languid hit from his mid-morning spliff. He says nothing as the naked woman materialises out of thin air, just watches as she slips behind a brick pillar. And because the pliability of the human mind is something to marvel at, the ability to compartmentalise, to deny, to repress and to reshape is something to behold, he simply shrugs off what he sees.

*Shit*, he thinks to himself as he studies the glowing ember of the joint between his fingers, old Elbo was right, this Swazi is *po-tent*.

# CHAPTER 2

## A thousand times

It's astounding how underwhelming a life-shattering experience can be. How easily it can be filed under a nervous breakdown, psychosis or just a little convenient modern-day delusion brought on by MSG or living next to a cell phone tower. No bells, no whistles, no dancing hippos, no thudding hooves of prophesied horsemen announcing the end. Not even a creak under the newfound weight of this existential knowledge that brings the very existence of atoms into question.

Where just this morning, every action still had an equal and opposite reaction; gravity pulled, and light refracted in raindrops bent obediently into rainbows, these things now seem little more than possibilities at best.

In that way humans do, Leda was less concerned with her venture into unknown worlds than with the fact that her clothes, her *underwear*, her phone, her everything had remained behind at the feet of her ex-employers.

Of course, the nudity in the basement of her old job had presented some logistical problems. So, after she had caught her breath, she had flagged down a taxi, pretending that the makeshift dress she'd fashioned from an old toothpaste poster found on the basement floor was the most basic thing in the world.

Now standing in front of her wardrobe - paper-dress crumpled in the dustbin - she picks a simple but elegant corset. It's a brocade affair, an over the bust design with steel boning and delicate lace trimmings. For right now, she can do with some centring. She needs to realign. Recalibrate. Feel the restricting embrace of the corset around her ribs, her chest. Like a self-hug. As if she needs to define where she ends, and the world begins.

She wraps the garment around her, draw the bust panels close, then slips each knob through its respective hoop. The very act of lacing up is a useful distraction, meditation, an art form all on its own.



Reaching around, she grabs hold of the bunny-eared laces at her waist and pulls. Like in a ritual, she starts to tighten all the X's, from top to middle, from bottom up. She tugs on the bunny ears every now and again to tighten the slack.

But this does not achieve the tightness she wants, so she hooks the bunny-eared laces over the doorknob and slowly leans forward. These things should be done over time, slowly and with restraint, this she knows. But as the fabric constricts tighter and tighter and even tighter around her body, she feels in control once more. Her breathing becomes shallow, and her head a bit light.

She's thus wholly unprepared when the door bursts open, and the doorknob hits her squarely between the shoulder blades.

"Oef!" she exclaims as the impact sends her reeling.

"Peony!" the man entering says brightly, poking his head around the door, "shit, I didn't expect you there! Ow, did I get you?"

"Obviously, you got me," Leda says angrily from all-fours, the skeletal muscle between her wing bones throbbing,

"What the fuck are you doing here, Jeremy?" her voice venomous, her eyes shooting blades.

But the man has turned his attention to the door and quickly engages each of the three locks. *Slam! Slam! Slam!*

"Um, is this plywood? It's not gonna hold; which is your best window?"

"Jeremy!?" Leda exclaims, trying to untangle herself from the doorknob, but he's already darted into another room.

Leda seethes with anger. This man, *this* man, gone for more than a year and the moment he gets back, he's got her tied up in a mess.

"What did you do now—" she starts, but a violent thumping from outside the door motivates her to speedily disengage the laces.

"Keen!" a voice thunders through the door.

Like an automaton, she goes into Jeremy-mode. The one where she lies to the police to save his ass or becomes the shill in his dime-store grift; or his wingman when he's looking to pull. For he might be her bane, but he's also her Achilles heel.

She fixes him with a look that says everything then drags him into the bedroom.

"Help me with this," she barks, and together they heave the bed in front of the door.

Together they give the bed a shove, and it thuds against the door.

She hadn't seen Jeremy in months or heard from him. She'd just assumed he'd found a new rock to crawl under. Or was emotionally keelhauling the long-suffering Leo as he always does. He's gotten old, she notices with some satisfaction. Below his sun-bleached hair, time has crossed his face, dragging 50 years' worth of baggage behind it, leaving furrows around his mouth and eyes. His skin has the sunburnt sheen of a recent chemical peel enforcing his signature look of antiquated pool boy.

There is a loud crash as the apartment door is smashed in.

From next door, Mrs McKinnes starts her incessant banging on the wall and yells: "What's going on in there!"

"Come, it must be the window!" Jeremy insists.

"We're on the fourth floor!"

From outside the door, a voice thunders: "Keen! We got you, you goddamn deplorable!" Heavy footfalls.

"What's going on!" yaps Mrs McKinnes through the wall.

"Well, window it is," says Jeremy cheerfully, his leg already dangling over the ledge.

The bedroom door thuds against the bed as the assailants try to enter. A big man with a big beard and some gold in his mouth leers at them through the crack in the door.

"Ha! Got you, you bastard!" says Beard with satisfaction.

"Wait!" Leda says in a panic and grabs Jeremy's arm before he can hurl himself out the window, and then ... the blue and white world rushes in around them.

"Oh," says Leda.

"Oh shit," says Jeremy.

"Where did they go?" says Beard, who has shoved the bed from the door and is now standing inside the room. Two smaller men swarm out from behind him and stare crazily about the place. They look like they've crawled out of the ocean with the sole purpose of bashing in heads. The one is jacked, the other thin and wiry as hell, but *he* has a cricket bat.

"Where ...?"

"What ...?"

More banging on the wall from the old bird next door.

From inside the blue world, Leda signals for Jeremy to remain quiet.

"They can't see or hear us," Jeremy says in response. But then remains quiet anyway.

Squatting down, they watch the skeletal shapes of the men frantically searching the room, under the bed, behind the curtains, inside the cupboard. As with the executives at *Sax & Ash*, colourful swirls of miasma billow inside each of the men. But theirs seem agitated. Hissing. Spitting like live wires. Prodding at the air like savage tentacles.

The men start searching the room, at times passing right through Leda and Jeremy while trudging unwittingly on the clothes they had left behind.

Leda also notices with an almost clinical awareness that Jeremy looks different from the men, solid, his features more clearly defined. A quick study of her own hands suggests it must be because he's *inside* this place with her. *Inside? Underneath?*

Soon, as with the first time, she can feel her breathing become shallow. And she must focus every fibre of her being not to burst from their mystical hiding place. Jeremy's rapidly moving chest tells that he shares her distress. Every second becomes an hour.

"Well," says one of the smaller guys eventually as he peers out the window, unwilling to believe his own eyes, "I guess they did the window anyhow."

*Can't breathe.*

"I'm gonna fucken kill that guy," says Beard with disgust so tangible his miasma has turned a low green. After what feels like a lifetime of them just standing there looking dumbstruck, the threesome leaves.

They had barely exited the room when Leda bursts through the boundary that separates the blue world from the other, heaving for air. She stands quietly for a moment, listening, but the apartment is silent.

"That was insane," she says eventually but looking around the room, no Jeremy. *What the –*

*He must still be down there!*

Squeezing her eyes shut, she tries to submerge herself willfully. Nothing. She stomps her foot - nothing.

"Come on!" she hisses and tries again. But to no avail.

*Okay.*

*Calm yourself.*

She gives a deep breath and relaxes into it. And the world engulfs her, and she's back in that place.

Jeremy is where she had left him, but he's doubled over, choking, both hands clutching his throat. Decisively Leda grabs him by the arm, and together they erupt back into the real world.

As Jeremy spends the next few minutes spluttering and gasping, Leda slips from the room to fish a T-shirt and sweats from the laundry basket then walks over to the kitchen to boil the kettle.

When Jeremy emerges from the room, he's wearing Leda's silk black gown with roses embroidered on the back. He grins at her sheepishly then sits down at the scuffed and scarred kitchen table.

"Those fucking guys ...," he starts, but Leda interrupts him taciturnly.

"Can we please talk about the other thing? *The other thing.*"

"Well, I can just tell you that they have the wrong guy. I have no idea why ...."

The kettle whistles, but the coffee remains unmade.

Leda turns around to face him, her arms folded across her chest, her face a mask of disbelief. How can he just sit there at the kitchen table as if reality hadn't just bent his brain over the space-time continuum and mind-fucked the living daylights out of him?

"Dad," she says quietly.

Jeremy is silent. A strange state of being for him. Disconcerting because the thing that allows her to tolerate her father is how predictable his unpredictability is. His shades of grey have been captured, calibrated, defined, and stored in a file in her brain that she can easily access. He's been this way her whole life. Ever since her mother's death, he'd consumed debauchery as if dispensed from a gumball machine, throwing himself at pleasure the way a suicidal man throws himself in front of a bus.

To him, her childhood had been a stage. His role in it, a performance piece. She vividly remembers one piece in particular:

Scene: Mid-day. Interior. A man is lying motionless on the floor. He's lithe, his boyish hips clad in jeans of the time, sky blue eyeshadow on his eyelids. He's an androgynous-Ophelia of the kitchen floor. The close up reveals a pool of bile by his head, stomach bile of the dark green variety. The first time this happens, you call the ambulance, and you cry. You do the same the second time. But by the third time, you're wise enough to know that your father knows exactly how many pills to swallow to be only half dead.

So, you first light a cigarette, pause in front of the telly to watch Tom torturing Jerry and then only do you dial. You're only fifteen.

Such was life with Jeremy, most of the time.

But then there was the *other* Jeremy. Cue the happy montage, cue comedic pancake disasters, and ice cream expeditions; cue tears being wiped away by his oversized thumb. Cue finding solace against his thin chest as a bangled arm encircles your head. But that Jeremy hasn't been around for years.

Jeremy's face disappears in his hands.

"The Strata ... it's called the Strata," the words fall through his splayed fingers.

"The Strata ...?" she says quizzically and turns the word around in her mouth a few times, "Strata ..."

In her mouth, words become lily pads that slip underwater each time she tries to find her footing.

"How do you ...know ... about ... it? What the hell -? Why is it happening?"

"Same reason your eyes are green. It's your mum's side of the family. Your mum, Myra, Stetson, Great Granny Knox, all of them have, had, the ability ...."

She tries centring herself by taking a deep breath. "This is insane. I am insane. We're both insane."

She busies herself with the empty cup in front of her for a moment, then eventually says: "Mum could ... go ... there?"

He nods. "When you were a baby, you used to just slip away, into it. Then she'd have to fetch you time and again."

*That is why something so strange had felt so familiar.*

"Then why did it *stop* happening? And why is it happening now?" she asks.

Jeremy's face stays hidden in his hands. He mumbles something barely audible.

"The what?"

"The meds ... I think ... the pills."

Ever since she can remember, pills have been part of her life. Adderall for the highs. Strattera for the lows. And Clonidine for good measure. She couldn't remember a time without it.

"You mean you drugged me?"

“Just when you were little, later you medicated yourself ... Maybe it was now triggered by something stressful?”

She doesn't want to think about the spectacle at *Sax & Ash*. Doesn't want to remember that slow-motion fall in front of those assholes. Instead, she revs up her anger at Jeremy: “How could you!? Keep this from me?”

“We wanted to protect you!”

“From what?”

“From that place!” Jeremy snaps but catches himself and takes a deep breath.

“Leda, look ... this thing you can do, it's very unique. And there are people who will want to use you.”

“For what?” Leda says, “to steal the Crown Jewels? Rob banks? I can't even take my clothes with me ... my goddamn tooth filling is lying on the floor of *Sax & Ash* somewhere! My underwear, for God's sake!”

“It's not what you can take in ...” he mumbles.

Leda's so angry she fails to ask the right questions. She lashes out:

“I can't believe you kept this from me! I've spent my whole life thinking I belonged ... somewhere else.”

Jeremy's first display of genuine fear is followed by his first display of true anger. Anger in itself is not new for Jeremy but this is different than his usual brand of outrage which is usually a tirade against the establishment, “the man,” big pharma, big banks, the guy at the Seven-Eleven. She's never seen him like this. Seething, shaking. Eyes staring fixedly from their sockets.

His voice is low, almost a hiss, when he talks: “Is this what you think this is? A gift? A talent? A place to belong? It's a curse. It's a goddamned distraction from real life. A useless distraction. This place took Anna; it kept her from me, from you ... and for what? To peer into other people's sorry lives?”

They stand facing each other, father and daughter. Mere inches apart but with a lifetime of hurt between them. In their own way, each is crushed by the failure to find the words they're looking for.

The front door creaks a little, breaking the spell. In the doorway stands a woman, an old girl. Her blue-white legs fall from a housecoat into a pair of Crocs. A cat spills from her

arms, the biggest cat Jeremy has ever seen. It doesn't look relaxed as much as resigned to its fate, its face daring them to judge.

"What's going on here?" the woman whines from the doorway. An unbecoming pink lipstick has bled into the creases of her slivery lips. She studies the broken door with great interest. Fingers the broken lock.

Hurrying to the door, Leda says, "It's nothing, Mrs McInnes. Just a misunderstanding ...".

"*Hmf*, Franz Ferdinand's assassination was a misunderstanding. This is disturbing the peace," the old woman says as the door closes in her face.

"You must comply with the rules," the old bat's voice continues through the door, "no loud noises allowed!"

The doorstep remains darkened for a few beats.

But by then, the fire has gone out of Jeremy. His shoulders slump, palms flat on the table.

When he eventually raises his head, that familiar veil of indifference is back in place.

"Look, we're both tired. I'm getting a room at the Sundog, and we'll talk some more tomorrow, okay?"

Leda doesn't respond and continues sitting at the table, refusing to look at him.

At the door, he pauses briefly. His smile is sad and small. And like a thousand times, in a thousand other cities, across a thousand other doorsteps, her father walks out of her life again.

# CHAPTER 3

## The limits of Euclidean physics

The pale-eyed man sits around being rich. It's not a luxury he often affords himself but every now and again, he sits down in the giant bucket chair in front of the floor-to-ceiling window and looks out at the lights of the city, a fine glass of bourbon in one hand.

The girl from last night's asleep up in the loft, her head still full of dreams brought by the emo dust. And he smiles a little smile at the memory of how sweetly she laughed when the lights filled her head, and every neuron sang, and the glow, the lovely glow, enveloped them so completely. And that's all. Nothing more. He just enjoys watching their delight as the drug takes hold. And the warmth of their bodies and the softness of their skins.

They're like a moment of pure, distilled humanity. The essence of what it means to be just a person. No one tells you but having a fuck-ton of money will take that away from you. The arbitrary and everyday pleasures give way to big pleasures meant for big appetites. And before long, the little things are gone. Some never even notice it. He does.

In a few hours, maybe, the girl will wake up. Her body will still be reverberating like a tungsten wire. Her mouth will be a little dry. And she'll have an insatiable craving that the basket of sweetmeats and strawberries next to the bed simply won't satisfy.

He walks over to the window and stares down at the streets below, his naked thigh pressing against the cold steel of the window frame.

Far below, the protest is gaining momentum. The small group of protesters gathering in the city centre is swelling into a sizable crowd. He peers down into the crowd, tries to pick out faces to see the expressions activated by all that anger. How great it must be to be part of something like that, a hive mind that moves in unison like an amoebic creature, its tentacles probing the limits of what society will tolerate.

He notices the absence of the little things. In fact, he seeks them out, tries to reconnect with those things that make life worth living for the masses with their insufferable lives. Walking a dog, 80s sitcoms, watching sports at a bar, greasy takeaways, the smell of wet earth as you fold living seeds into the soil. It is little more than a hobby, a curiosity really,



these ventures into the little pleasures. However, he readily admits that a good homemade fruit preserve comes close to seeing God.

Another thing of little consequence to him these days is geography. Geography doesn't matter anymore. He can go anywhere, any time. A jet, complete with cherry-cheeked air hostesses and reclining seats, will be readied at the snap of his fingers. But Milan, the Maldives, Budapest, these places are like having access to only the first chapter of a book and knowing you'll never read the rest. Because the travel *he* is interested in cannot be counted in centimetres or kilometres but in the anomaly encoded in genes gifted to the ignorant, the ungrateful and the undeserving. Those who can traverse this plane and access the other – the Strata.

He's made it his life's work to find them, use them, find the key to this very, very special ability.

He rests his forehead against the windowpane.

It really is wasted on them. None of them know what to do with this gift. None of them know what it means. Gods with small-man syndrome. Instead, they whine: *oh, what is the meaning of this? Why me?*

By most parameters, he is an average-looking man, except for the eyes. If pushed, one may conclude that they are an exceptionally light shade of amber. One of "his girls" - a lovely, silly girl – once described it as "cosmic latte", what scientists consider the colour of the universe to be. But instead of the translucency showing his soul, those light eyes seem only to reflect you back at yourself.

The mechanical whisper of the lift's arrival does not prompt him to turn. He already knows who it will be. The guards are under strict instructions to let no one up but his trusted aide.

"Sabien, I have news," says the man who is always measured in his speech, but today there is a touch of colour in his voice that makes the pale-eyed man turn to face him.

"It's Michael Faraday, Sir. There is good reason to believe that she's activated. She is submerging!"

Ian Sabien's heart skips a beat.

"After all this time ..." he whispers, desperate for it to be true, "are you sure, Alexi?"

The garbled sound of a bullhorn reaches them from the streets below. Although the words are lost, the rage is evident.

“Our agent is sure.”

Light moves behind the man’s eyes, the corners of his mouth curl upwards. *Well, well, well. Rather late than never.*

He’d lost faith that the dark-haired girl - code name, Michael Faraday - would ever manifest. Most wayfarers, those who can travel between worlds, manifest in their early teens, and she must be, what mid-twenties already?

He had not shared his growing fears with anyone; he hasn't been able to find a single good prospect as of late. Not with the other partners. Because even though he detests these wayfarers, he needs them. And it's his job to find them.

For the most part, his leads have been exhausted. Dead-ends from Albuquerque to Zimbabwe. He’d managed to keep track of the old man, code-named Nikola Tesla, but he was of no use anyway. And he had his eye on a young Korean kid, but who knows if that will pan out. He lost one wayfarer last year. A promising young man who just never surfaced again, as far as they can tell. This means they’re down to the five abroad, and Marie Curie ... his underarms prickle at the thought of the woman. He doesn’t scare easily, but she’ll rewire your limbic system for a careless glance, and you won’t feel anything again. But she is the most important thing around. Until he can find others.

Finding these people is the very essence of his existence. And he’s great at it. He’d been searching for wayfarers under every rock, in every shanty, every tenement, every goddamn suburban two-storey, every mansion, every place you can think of. He’s plotted every bloodline, distant cousins, dusted off family secrets to find illegitimate bastards. Dammit, he's checked out those who received blood donations from a prospect. He has spies on every continent. And besides *those*, he has hundreds of feedback mechanisms, grapevines, internet chatrooms and sub/reddits that don’t even know they’re doing his bidding. God bless the internet.

“Well then, we have to start the ... recruitment process.”

“Which protocol do you have in mind?”

The pale-eyed man thinks on this for a moment. “Her father still around?”

Alexi nods.

“Good, then *La Familia es todo it is.*” The Family is all.

"Very good," Sabien says.

“ ...”

“Yes, sir?”

“I think we should keep this quiet, from corporate, I mean ... Just until we know, and things are in hand, if you know what I mean.”

The two men’s eyes lock in mutual understanding.

“Well,” says Ian Sabien with the pale eyes, “good news deserves a celebration.” He takes a satin pouch from one of the wall-mounted sanctuary lamps. He pours a tiny bit of the purple, crystal-like substance into his palm and then some into his own.

“Blessed be her glorious assumption!” he says, and his tongue darts at the crystals in his hand. He sinks back into the chair, and before the drug envelops him in sweet oblivion, he says to his aide: “Oh, and you’ll take care of” - his eyes go up to the loft – “the girl. Can’t risk her going full junkie on us. You know how they get.” It’s a pity, he thinks briefly as warm notes start careening across his field of vision. I really did enjoy this one.

# CHAPTER 4

## Peepshow

Jeremy doesn't return the next day, or the next, and she goes looking for him at the motel. He owes her some honesty. A tall order, she knows. Instead, she'll get pouting and short, staccato answers better suited to an impossible child than a grown man.

How could he have kept this from her? All these years? You'd think something like this would come up at some point. *Hey Leda, did you know you can access an ethereal plane? Please pass the salt.*

Leda once saw a psychologist who reminded her of Wonderland's caterpillar. He dispensed his wisdom through plumes of sandalwood-scented vapour while committing the crime of wearing a corduroy jacket and matching slacks. Most of his utterances were bastardisations of things someone great once said:

"Satan in likeness of an Angel bright ..." he said through plumes, "... betwixt the Centaurs and the Scorpion steering his zenith while the sun in Aries rose ...."

"Huh?"

"Milton," he said down his nose, "you have to steer towards the sun, *towards!* What you're doing is steering away from Aries towards distant constellations – beastly men and poisonous creatures."

"Wait, am I Satan in this analogy?"

"Uh, yes ... but Milton's Satan ... Morningstar, Lucifer."

"And my father is supposed to be ..?"

The air would hang heavy with vapour and the weight of his words. And then he would try to sell her on Amway.

And sure, he was an unethical fool, but he was right about one thing – daddy issues. The order she craves is an antidote to Jeremy's chaos. *He's* the reason why she folds her shirts with military precision. *He's* the reason why she finds asymmetrical things abhorrent, why corsets, why biting wit. Why she chooses relationships that are doomed to fail. Why she obsessively collects, categorises and labels pieces of paper that mark moments in her life in a

box labelled 'Life Ephemera'. And she can no less discard Jeremy as she can that damn box. It's the only thing that hints at who she really is. Besides, her need to *know* outweighs her resentment, so she takes a drive to the motel.

The Sundog Motel may have once held a proud position just off the vein that fed visitors to the city. But efforts of urban renewal had banished it to a life of scorn and neglect under a bridge. There it squats like a contemptuous troll, attracting only the nameless, the unlawful and the unholy. She passes a group of protesters carrying signs. One sets fire to a dustbin.

Leda pulls into the parking lot and makes her way to the building. It's a four-storey affair that teeters close to the sidewalk like a big, ugly baby with greyish-blue skin who couldn't muster affection from its own mother. If it had been painted, the paint would have peeled. A gaping crack creeps from the third floor into the very foundation like an ill-intentioned G-string. Its windows stare out onto a desolate parking lot and a neglected swimming pool. Some of the windows are broken, others boarded up.

The inside is not much of an improvement. It looks like a Hellmouth where washed-out reality stars go to wash down special-occasion whisky with a chaser of lead.

The *genius loci* of the motel sits in the reception booth behind three centimetres of dirt-smeared glass. She's young, just out of her teens, but neglect has settled on her face like dust. Her t-shirt reads: *How long since you've changed your oil?* A bug-eyed baby hangs from her hip. The badge pinned to her chest says: *Hello, I'm Pam.*

"The TV, the radio, book and baby," Leda says lightly when she enters, "pretty impressive multi-tasking skills."

"Don't forget the Kegel crunches," the girl says, letting her know she's not about to add chit-chat to the list. She launches into the usual mantra: "No dogs no guns no drugs no solicitation no noise after nine, and no open flames in the rooms."

"No, no, I don't want to stay. I'm looking for a guest."

"Which one?" the receptionist says, popping a boob out from under her tee and prodding it into the baby's mouth.

"Jeremy Keen?"

The girl doesn't miss a beat, "blonde? Looks like the 70s been left out in the sun too long?"

Leda nods, struggling to keep her eyes off the wet furrow that is the baby's mouth as it latches onto its mother's nipple like a remora suckerfish.

"Nah, that old dude left after one night, long gone."

*How deplorable! How despicable! How typical.*

More irritated than angry, Leda lashes out at the receptionist: "So, whatever happened to guest-confidentiality? I thought you weren't supposed to give out information about guests."

"Well," says the girl slapping down a piece of paper with her free hand, "someone must foot the bill. Guy bailed without paying."

The anger and disappointment wash over her like a wave. She pays the bill with her last money and leaves the hotel.

She makes a quick call to Leo, Jeremy's on and off boyfriend and the best part of him.

"Leda!" says Leo with genuine pleasure.

"I'm looking for my dad. Have you heard from him?"

As it goes quiet for a moment, Leda pictures the soft-spoken man's cheeks flush with concern.

"Why I haven't heard from him since ... well. We had a fight, you know ... Last time we spoke, he stormed out the door."

Leda sighed. That was pretty much the way Jeremy exited most rooms. If there was someone who suffered more than her under Jeremy's cruel disaffection, it was Leo.

"Why? Did something happen?" asks Leo.

"No, no, not at all ... I think," Leda says, sounding utterly unsure.

"Oh, okay... will you let me know?" asks Leo.

When the car door closes, she bows her head over the steering wheel and for the first time in years, she allows the tears to come. The disappointment pours from her, shaking her shoulders and burning her throat. A few passersby slow down to watch the shaking shoulders, but Leda doesn't care.

She just wants to flee. Go. Get away. Go somewhere ... else.

And when she does, it comes as a tremendous relief.

It is then she learns that slipping into the Strata is as easy as a hiccup. It takes just a slight shift of the weight and the will to go there. This time she savours everything. The moment of transition feels like a thousand bubbles bursting against her skin. She sees the

interior of her car, the world outside, so normal yet utterly strange. She feels isolated, removed, almost like being at the bottom of the ocean, but at the same time, more connected to the world than ever before.

Down here, there is a dissonance of sound. Like the ones at the bottom of a swimming pool, tiny gurgles and burps mix with sounds from the outside world - music from a stereo, the incessant honking of a passing truck, voices like those in a dream. Everything is a little muted, a little slower as if travelling through dense liquid.

This becomes her life for the next few weeks. She stops obsessing about her father. Instead, she loses herself in this new, all-access pass she's been given to the world. It also makes getting undressed a breeze.

This new distraction even silences her need to lace up and trip out. Her corsets remain in the cupboard, her dealer's number undialed. When she thinks of Decher, the only memory that comes up is of his penis, a delicate little thing but audacious like a little baby bird snuggled in a nest of brittle blonde hair.

She tests this new world's physics. Its parameters. Here all seem relative, malleable; distances are virtual, somatic spaces become existential, perspective so subjective, up becomes down; down, up. Here boundaries become sheer, penetrable outlines, and the horizon stretches unhindered into a blind white distance.

From inside this world without borders and walls, she's always aware of others close by. Like faint torches at twilight, she can see her neighbours going about their daily lives. Sometimes their miasmas are diffused and at other times ablaze with luminous light in a constant state of flux, shifting, growing, diminishing, changing colour. Sheepishly she wonders if she's looking at their souls.

She has free reign of the apartment block and wanders around aimlessly in other people's apartments when they aren't there, simply because she can. She watches their TVs; eat from a different fridge each day. She's quick to learn that Mr Granger in 22 is great at Moroccan cuisine; Tuesdays are curry nights at the Westons', and she learns to avoid whatever is in the fridge of the three students on a floor below. Next door, at Mrs McInnes's, she gently rubs the ears of the big, sad tabby, who, according to her collar, is called Morning, and opens the window, giving her access to the world.

And the people themselves become her menagerie. Where before they were merely strangers that she greeted in the stairwell, they are now objects of interest. Like reality TV

stars, their lives are splayed wide open for her to see. They eat, make love, watch TV, fight and laugh and do other intimate things she makes a point of avoiding.

It is the small things, the moments unshared, that are the sweetest. And when she's gorged herself on someone's secret misery or hidden vice, she moves on to the next, much like changing the channel.

She listens raptly to a conversation a woman is having with her elderly father over the phone.

"So, are you coming home for Christmas, Maggie?" asks the old man, his voice as brittle as a photograph left out in the rain, "you know how anxious your mother gets when you don't come." It's not the words that keep Leda engaged but the woman's demeanour. She sits as if her frame has collapsed in on itself. Her head rests in her hands – the pose of a stock photograph model illustrating a headache.

"Daddy, mom died three years ago," she says gently, "and it's only April now, remember?"

The line is silent for a beat. Then another.

When he speaks again, he seems further away, as if he's grown a little smaller on the other side of the line.

"Oh ... yes, my mind is not what it used to be." They both manage a little laugh.

She tells him about her life, and how tall the boys have grown and that they're thinking of home schooling, but that would depend on whether Drew gets that increase or not.

He reciprocates by saying that having a hand in their education will be immensely valuable to them and her. And would she please bring them with her this Christmas because she knows how her mother gets when they don't come.

The woman named Maggie says, "Yes, Daddy. We'll be there. We won't miss it for the world."

The very voyeuristic nature of her gaze is lost on Leda. In her mind, she is just a casual observer. A bystander who has no option but to see.

Inside her landlord, Larry's, apartment, she finds the biggest surprise. For starters, it's not what she expects it to be. Instead of life-size paper cutouts of Arnold Schwarzenegger or Stone-Cold Steve Austin, it has an undeniable old lady charm, most probably the legacy of a family matriarch long passed. Inside it looks as if *The Antique Roadshow* had haemorrhaged



fine bone china and other heirloom trinkets in there. From the walls, soft watercolour washes of stoic young women peer from garishly gilded frames while Tiffany-style lamps reflect the mid-morning sun in gemstone shades of blue and orange.

But it is the collection of Hummel figurines occupying the old-fashioned display cabinet that captures her attention. Caught in porcelain, each figurine is frozen forever mid-play – a boy tempting a dog with a stick, a girl in conversation with a bird, two girls carrying a pail, another talking into a box-telephone, are among the population of exclusive pieces.

But the discovery of the prized inhabitants of Larry's display cabinet pales in comparison to what she finds next.

On a purple felted pinup board, among discount coupons for protein shakes and motivational quotes, is a collage of photographs. And, caught in the silver-atoms of each one is Leda's own face.

Her blood freezes at the discovery. Her underarms prick.

The photos depict her engaged in various activities. This is her walking up the stairs; this is her shopping; this is her at her front door; this one is an ID photo she thought she'd lost and had to retake.

She stares at the board in confusion. She can't fathom the meaning of it, the dots too random for her to connect.

None of these makes sense. Are they surveillance? Are they obsession? Could shy Larry Botha be a stalker? Or a spy? She remembers Jeremy's ominous words: *They could be watching us right now.*

Somewhere, at the periphery of her mind, she becomes aware of footsteps sounding down the corridor but fails to consciously register it.

She picks one of the photos from the board. In it, she is carrying grocery bags and exiting the bakery on Maple Street. She can't quite remember the day on which the photo was taken. But she looks contemplative, sad almost.

A key turns in the lock.

The other photos are also voyeuristic in nature, apart from the one group photo taken at a tenant's braai last year. Her stomach churns.

She only truly takes note of Larry's return when the door gives a definite creak before swinging open, giving her a split second to slip back into the Strata.

Where she had stood moments before, the photo floats to the floor.

Her landlord's short and stocky silhouette appears in the doorway. He takes a few steps into the apartment then stops to watch the photograph settle on the tiles.

Inside the Strata, Leda doesn't leave right away. She studies his face in search of clues to the meaning of this ..! But apart from the slight furrow between his brows, his face remains impassive. *They have people everywhere. They could be watching us right now ...*

Larry Botha watches the paper float to the floor. It settles silently on the tile. Short in stature, his overzealous weightlifting regime had bulked him into permanent beast mode. Jacked major muscles had turned his walk into a skulk. He stops in front of the photo, expels air through his nose and looks about the room.

Leda watches his miasma change from a mellow pink to blood orange.

The dust whirls and drifts in a sunbeam as if making the most of its time in the spotlight.

# CHAPTER 5

## A Hummel's tale

A few days after her discovery that Larry Botha was a pervert and a well-off one at that, he comes knocking on Leda's door. He lounges in the doorway, his presence a menacing force in Polly shorts.

Perhaps menacing is a strong word. Perhaps the word "petulant" best describes his brand of malice. Like the type you'd attribute to a troll, or a leprechaun or a mean sprite trying to look fierce by standing on tiptoes.

"What?" Leda says, ripping open the door that's still not fixed from when her father's uninvited guests came to thump first and question later.

Larry Botha seems incapable of building shoulder muscles despite his obsessive reps of barbell pushes and lateral raises. His neck just juts at the base to form a torso that splits into two bulbous quads.

He arranges himself in what he thinks is a casual pose against the door frame.

A slew of playground name calling ricochets in her head: *Juice junky, roid rager, badger milk bandit, pervarotti, reprobate*. She should confront him about the photos. Ask him where the hell he gets off spying on her. But the last thing she needs now is to be out on the street.

They look at one another the way welterweight fighters do in the octagon. The guy's lids seem to fold over his eyes, hiding most of the sclera and reasserting the impression Leda has of him as a reptile.

*Pied peeper, also-ran, pantywaist, he of the tiny testes, mouth breather, incel ...*

He's the one who breaks the eye contact and the silence: "What happened here?" He says instead and pokes at the door handle hanging from its hinge.

"Yes, you better fix that," Leda says defiantly. "But come back later, bit busy now," she starts closing the door.

He deftly inserts his foot in the doorway. Leda becomes very aware of the muscles like rope in his neck, the steel plates that are his pectoral muscles. He reminds her of the armoured car called *die wit vark*.

She can protect herself if needs be. She has a few moves. For all Jeremy's shortcomings, he did teach her a couple of things: how to dovetail playing cards so the deck stays stacked, for example. That it takes about 23 kilograms of force to rupture testicles and about two to rip off a human ear. Or that you should hit an attacker's nose with the palm of your hand to drive the bone into his brain.

She remembers Jeremy standing in front of her, the keys to his ratty old Fiat jammed between his fingers.

"You hold 'em like this," he'd said and jabbed the key towards her little face. She was ten at the time. She didn't flinch as the key glinted between his fingers.

"Now you try," he said, tucking the keys into her hand.

She grasped the cold hard steel in her tiny palm.

"Not like that; you'll just rip off your own finger," he said and adjusted it firmly.

'Pow, see?' her hand in his he stabbed at the air, "like that. You see?"

So far, she had not needed to rip off any ears or stab anyone in the eye, and she was hoping to avoid it now.

"We've gotta talk about the rent," says Larry, bringing her back to the present. His smile is pinched and bloodless. "Two. You owe me two months. I let it go last month 'cause of the job and all. But we gotta make it right."

"Dammit, Larry, you know what's what. You'll have to give me a couple of days," she hits back.

"I've given you a couple of days-," he retorts, but then his demeanour changes, softens, and he leans in a bit.

"Look, I know it's been tough. You know I want to help you out, right?" His voice is low, cloying. Like syrup being poured. He brings his face far too close to hers. She can smell his deodorant, trying to mask the muskiness underneath.

Despite her conscious efforts not to recoil, she gives a step back.

"Fine. I'll have it," she says at last, "this afternoon."

"Well," he says and pulls himself a few inches taller. He looks like he wants to say something but resorts to, "Good. Okay. Sure then."

‘I’ll have the money,’ she says quickly and shuts the door.

Later that afternoon, Leda slips into the Strata and walks straight through her neighbours’ homes to Larry’s. She had waited until his big bunch of keys dangled past her apartment, so she knew he had left for the gym.

Once inside Larry’s strangely effeminate apartment, she moves swiftly, purposely ignoring the pinup board with its various effigies of her. She opens one of the kitchen windows looking out onto the corridor, and puts a Hummel figurine on the sill, obscured from view by the steel window frame. Then she returns to her own apartment and, throwing on a robe, she collects the Hummel from the sill and sells it to an antique dealer on the other side of the city.

Ten minutes to three, she's knocking on Larry's door. He peeks out suspiciously then steps out of the apartment, shutting the door behind him.

“Your money,” she says flatly and enjoys the look of disappointment on his face.

# CHAPTER 6

## Still not dead (sort of)

There's a house in Doornfontein that she's been thinking about a lot lately. It calls to her like a beacon in the night. It comes in her dreams. Its dormer windows hint at answers beyond their darkened frames. Much like a sticky song, *an earworm*, it advances and recedes, advances and recedes from her thoughts, growing a little louder each time until it is the only thing she can think of.

Leda had loved that house as a kid, the aunt who lived in it even more. Aunt Myra was a firecracker. The air around her stirred when she moved. Her voluminous skirts rustled when she walked. When she spoke, her paint-flecked hands drew wild, elaborate pictures in the air. She was a foul-mouthed, green tea-drinking anarchist who hated capitalism but loved *Cosmopolitan*; who decried consumer-culture but couldn't do without a fresh spitzer of *Jacomo for her*. She was the enthusiastic author of her own twisted mythology. And Leda had been too young to recognise that her aunt's happiness was more or less equivalent to the number of G&T's at hand.

Myra, in turn, adored her niece. Having no children of her own, she doted on Leda. It was Aunt Myra who first showed Leda how to paint. She taught her about perspective, about "fat over lean" and the beauty of the lost line.

So, often one would find woman and girl painting side by side. Myra's paintings were bold, bright abstractions of flowers that looked more like explosions of petals and fronds and twirling vines than still life.

Leda, on the other hand, captured mainly faces on canvas. They were beautiful, meticulous representations of the human form. Technically precise. Skillful. A celebration of accuracy. And try as she might, Myra could never quite convince Leda of the joys of colouring outside the lines.

Myra's house was situated on Lower Railway Street in a suburb that spilled into the industrial area of downtown Johannesburg. Whoever had initially designed the house had been inspired by architecture across cultures and across time. The result was a bizarre fusion of romantic Jacobethan Revival and baronial - all misplaced cupolas, unnecessary turrets,

oversized bay windows and a parapet for good measure. It was beautiful but disconcerting. The perfect house for Myra, who herself was beautiful and disconcerting.

Leda remembers Myra's garden: a field of flowers, no clipped lawns or flower beds.

"It has to be free!" she'd say about her garden, "free to consort! Freedom of movement!"

Columbines, sage, foxgloves, rosemary, lavender, grew in abundance. Poppies in pastel yellow, orange, pink swayed like uptight debutantes moved by invisible music. Field grasses with soft white plumes sheened like sheets of rain to gusts of that same music.

It's been five years since Leda last visited that house. It wasn't so much a grudge that sustained the anger as it was a carefully cultivated indifference. In fact, Leda was no longer sure what their fallout had been about but that when it came to *not giving fucks*, she, Leda, had won.

But now, the answers lay within her estranged aunt's chest. And all she had to do was walk up to the door and say, hello, Aunt Myra. She had no doubt that the woman would welcome her, wrap her up in her rounded arms in an embrace that smelled of raw linseed and oil paint.

Despite this, Leda is reluctant. It's a stubborn sense of pride that makes her hesitate. But this need for a guide is a central one. What use is it having the key to the biggest mystery of mankind and not knowing what to do with it? What is knowledge without meaning? And eventually, the need to know is more important than some ancient argument, so Leda makes her way to the house on Lower Railway Street.

Even when her anger towards her aunt was enflamed, Leda would visit the house via *Google Earth* every so often. So, she was aware that the neighbourhood had fallen into disrepair. She'd fly there with the click of a mouse, then zoom in on the black shingled roof hoping to see some sign of her aunt - a car moved, a dustbin opened, a tree planted. But despite these omnipotent excursions, nothing had prepared her for the depth of decay she now sees.

This part of the city has all but died. There's a repressed anger seething beneath, threatening to ooze from the cracks on the pavement, the inside of a fire-gutted flatblock. The buildings here are worn. Blight has seeped into the crenulations and corbels. While number nine has not escaped the rot, its neighbours are stripped down to bare bones.

She parks across the road from the house, next to a chain-linked fence surrounding a construction project abandoned years ago.

About eight years of age, three children sit with their feet in the gutter a while away from her car. They talk excitedly among themselves when they spot her car pulling up.

Emerging from the car Leda squints against the sun like the sole survivor of a dystopian future, the house obfuscated by the glaring sun. She brings her hand to her eyes to shield it from the glare, and there it stands, a paragon from her childhood.

A couple of gangster-types drift by, riding low and listening loud. But Leda meets their eyes as they pass, fear no longer a factor. After all, *she* is now the thing that goes bump in the night.

She mounts the steps to the front door in disbelief. Disbelief partly at the extent of the decay, partly because the lovely stained-glass wheel window is still intact. In a way, she hopes not to find her aunt there. Maybe she eventually moved to Aruba as she sometimes said she would when she got fed up with the world.

And indeed, the house is locked. The cobwebs that connect the corners attest that the door hasn't been used for a long time. She knocks, and the door sounds hollow as if its insides have been eaten by termites or vermin.

Across the road, the three guttersnipes watch her intently; the smallest one calls out to her: "*Umtyi womphefumlo! Umtyi womphefumlo!*". But they don't approach, just watch her intently, their big eyes white in dirty faces.

Her Xhosa is a bit thin, and she thinks they might be saying something about a devil, but she can't be sure.

She sends a smile their way and raises a hand that says, *it's fine, I've got this*. The boys don't smile back. They only continue to watch her with a mixture of dread and curiosity.

Leda gives a few steps back and looks up. She is reminded of a while ago, outside *Sax & Ash*, trying to tame the fear bucking in her stomach like a defiant mustang. And despite the house being bathed in the sun, she realises that she is frightened. Besides, daylight menace is the worst kind.

She walks around the house past the dirty windows to the back door. In her mind, every mud-caked window frames a monster.



Of Myra's free-love garden, there is little left. Nature had been usurped by rubbish and urban decay. Instead of poppies and columbines, green and brown bottle shards reflect in the sun. An old blue couch, its coiled guts exposed, is rotting away next to the garden shed.

Gingerly she sets aside the screen door hanging perilously from one hinge. Through the dust and soot caking the window, she can see furniture standing around in quiet, darkened contemplation. Like actors, waiting for their curtain call. She recognises the furniture, the paintings on the wall. They're Myra's alright. Only now, her aunt's favourite tatty recliner is covered not only in a floral throw but also in a sheet of dust.

Glancing about and finding the coast clear, Leda slips into the Strata and walks through the wall into this house that time forgot.

From *inside*, the interior takes on a different sense of eerie, revealing the activity of numerous insects; a family of field mice has made their home in one of the couches.

She emerges back into the real world in the kitchen. Apart from the creatures and the grime, everything seems untouched. Vandals and squatters may have taken refuge in the garden and the rotting shed, but not here. The dust lies largely undisturbed.

A plump little teapot still stands on a stovetop. It had been well-used once upon a time but not recently, judging by the dirt. Leda touches it and instantly regrets it, especially as she has no pants to wipe her hand on.

On the refrigerator, an ice-creamed coloured relic from the 80s, a couple of magnets weighed down by dirt are gradually making their way down the refrigerator door as if performing the world's most lethargic escape.

A postcard catches her eye. On its front is a pack of wild dogs aloofly eyeing the camera like teenagers on family-photo day. The landscape around them is a sea of short shrubs and rock outcrops that stretch to some point beyond the postcard's edge.

She picks the card from the door and flips it around in her hand. In tall, bold letters, it reads:

*Still not dead, thought you'd like to know – Mel.*

Mel. She remembered him, her uncle. Myra and Leda's mother, Anna's, brother. Although his name was Mel, he had gotten the nickname Stetson for his love of that hat brand. A tall, broad-shouldered man whom she perhaps remembers more from the stories her folks and Myra had told. But she *does* also remember the time he visited them. She was tiny, her mom still alive. What she remembers most is his laugh. It had been low, guttural like

thunder rolling in from rocky hills. At first, the sound had given her a fright, but then it made her laugh. And the more the tiny little Leda laughed, the more the man laughed until the two of them were caught in a loop of laughter that made other people feel left out of the joke.

The postcard is old to the point of yellowing. The stamp dates it eleven years back. In tall letters above the date, in grungy black letters, is the name of a place: *Oorvloed* – Abundance.

With the postcard still in her hand, Leda walks into the living room. This room, too, has been visited by Stephen King's Langoliers. The *I heart books* teddy bear is still on the shelf next to the naked Kewpie doll. A book titled *Children of the Twilight Revolution* still straddles the recliner's armrest as if its reader had just abandoned it momentarily to make a quick cup of tea. Candlesticks, a photo of her and Jeremy laughing, an old antiwar campaign poster, it is all still there. For a moment, she is sure there's a whiff of linseed oil in the air. But maybe that's just residue from memory.

Here and there's evidence of gatecrashers, a footprint in the dust, a smudge. But for the most part, things are untouched. Indeed, no one has made their home here in years. Those looking to loot or hunker down seem to have been frightened away by the sense that something about this place is very, very wrong.

A low rasping sound from somewhere in the house stops her in her tracks. Slowly she turns around to face the staircase. The postcard falls from her fingers. Low. Rasping. The sound is coming from upstairs.

It's the wind in the wire mesh screens, she tells herself, a branch scraping the window. She stands at the base of the stairs for a few seconds listening, then slowly sinks back into the Strata. She tests the veracity of the first two steps, but of course, inside the Strata, the exercise is futile.

She ascends slowly, her hand running along the outline of the railing. About two quarters up, she touches something soft, organic. She jerks it away in disgust.

Tentatively she lowers her face to the unknown substance. It's small, mere globules smeared under the railing like gum. She leans in closer. Translucent, wet with colours inside of it, moving, shifting. Faint, barely discernible, but undeniably there ... *It's almost like ... no, it is exactly like the colours she's seen moving in living things!*

She recoils in horror. The dread around her neck buries its heels deeper in her throat.

*Oh my God, it's alive.*

Her skin prickles. She glances up the looming staircase, and her fears are confirmed; these are just the outer edges of a mass sprawling to the top floor.

*Lines. Tertiary. Gargantuan. Myrrh.* She speaks some of her favourite words, like a mantra.

Despite her brain, her legs continue up the stairs. *Lines. Tertiary. Gargantuan. Myrrh.* The higher she climbs, the more secretion there is, growing thicker, more membranous like a tumour, more visceral until, in places, it must be up to 50, 60cm thick. It's on the walls, the ceiling, over the light switches. It coats the hanging lamps, the paintings on the wall. The supple, moist surface is illuminated from inside by the faint iridescent glow that turns from lavender to a deep turquoise, some of it seeping out into the room.

*Lines. Tertiary. Gargantuan. Myrrh.*

She follows the trail to what use to be her aunt's bedroom. Here the miasma is thicker, more palpable, like mist. The sprawling form culminates in one corner where it reaches critical mass. In the goop, Leda discerns a poorly formed foot, a breast, an eye, the lid barely formed, the iris the same golden flecked green as her aunt's had been. Just beneath its skin, a network of spidery veins is contrasted by the light inside.

Leda looks on in horror at the macabre wallpaper. There's no denying it, this is skin and bone and cartilage transmuted into primordial goop. It seems as if a human being has been melted down into this sludge.

A malformed foot, the ridges of a spine, an ear, and another ear, the curve of a collarbone. The skin creature throbs. A leg, maybe, an ear, a foot ... a foot? That makes it two, three ...

She was wrong. This isn't a person melted down. It's many. And Leda thinks she knows what happened to the vagrants and looters.

*You're different,* says a voice. Not a voice. For it is coming from inside her own head. For a voice without sound or vocal cords, this one is distinctively feminine, musical, languid ... as if every ... word ... is drawn out. Breathless. As if its owner has just awakened from a lovely dream.

"Hello?" says Leda.

*You're different from the new children.*

"Hello? Uh, Myra?"

Laughter like bells sounds in Leda's head.

"Myra?" Leda asks again. So intently she listens to the voice that she only vaguely becomes aware that the tightness is starting in her chest.

*Hmmm, here we are all just part of the ether.*

There's a pause.

*But you're inside, says the voice. You're so close ... so close to being free ...*

"I don't understand ..." says Leda

*If you join us, you will know. You'll know. We know you want to know, says the voice.*

It's as if the voice knows her. Knows her deepest desires. Knows how much she wishes to understand.

The tightness in Leda's chest spreads to her head, her extremities, and slowly the tightness becomes light. Like an endurance diver, seized by raptures of the deep, she feels a sense of euphoria, an imperviousness that rocks her back and forth like a wave.

*Come, says the voice, feel eternal in your bones. Your cells.*

She sinks deeper ... deeper ... deeper. *This is what bliss feels like. This is what oblivion feels like.* The universe clicks into place, existence comes into view, consciousness reveals itself.

No! Instinctively, Leda knows she must fight ... must not give in to the blue .... And with every ounce of self-restraint she's ever mustered, she tears herself from the lull, the allure of just dissolving into the ether.

Bursting out of the Strata, she feels as if her throat is on fire. She grabs at her arms, chest, and legs to make sure they're there, her head, that they haven't somehow become part of that skin monster that started out as her aunt.

Looking wildly about the room, now just an ordinary long abandoned and neglected boudoir, she finds no trace of the writhing throbbing thing. For it exists only inside the Strata. She shudders. The world may be full of these flesh creatures.

She descends the stairs two by two, then submerges just to exit the house through the same wall she had entered. Back in her clothes, Leda pulls her hoodie over her head and shudders despite the heat.

At just seven and a half, the boy is old beyond his years. A while after the lady went around the house, Mzi and Tatti had wandered off, bored with the heat and the endless afternoon. But *he* had waited around to see whether the lady would leave the haunted house. He's seen

other people go in but never out. Everyone in the neighbourhood knows that the devil lives there in that house. Has for years. So when the lady appears from around the corner, the curious young boy is stunned and also a little afraid.

# CHAPTER 7

## Maboneng

Leda walks. She must get as far away from this abomination as possible. She knows it's her aunt in there, or it used to be. Or part of it used to be. What it is now, she doesn't know. But that it wanted her, *that* she knows for sure.

She leaves her car at the curb and starts walking. Just walking. She has to think. Has to process ... that.

Like a solemn little spirit, she wanders the city, its heat islands, its cooling bridges, its litter-laden gutters and pigeon-lined peaks, its graffitied messages of love and hate.

She can't shake her revulsion at the gruesome discovery made at the house. Bloating and lumpy with pieces of people still easily discernible. And the voice - *the voice!* - hypnotising, intoxicating, filling her head with promises of eternal wisdom, bodily transcendence, a heaven where every neuron hums with perfect equilibrium. It's not hard to imagine that her aunt had given in to that call. That she had *chosen* to become that thing.

Leda's eye catches something on a wall. She's seen it many times before, but this time she really *sees* it. On one brick wall, faded white by the sun, is the clumsy outline of a person spray-painted in electric blue. Inside the silhouette, rough squiggles in assorted colours.

Aerosol.

She spots another across the street on a power box. She meanders over to it in a trance. Her fingers trace the outline, then the squiggles painted inside of it.

There's another one. This one is on a pillar. And another. And another. She pictures the bent figure of Aerosol darting down the street, a string of bodies left in his wake.

The next silhouette is painted on a once-white wall. This one is almost entirely obscured by graffiti expressing anger, love and lust, but it's there. Beckoning her. Hinting. Unseeingly, like a hopeful bird, she follows the silhouettes as if they are a trail of crumbs.

She is so preoccupied that she does not notice the city changing around her. The streets aren't desolate anymore. A car passes her by every so often. As she walks, the concrete-encased sidewalks are starting to pulse with a steady rhythm. The number of

broken windows becomes fewer. And the trail of Aerosol's human-shaped signposts runs dry. Among the warehouses and industrial plants, she has wandered into a cultural oasis, an island of art, music, and food. The big machine noises from factories still operating in the area form the backdrop to an art revolution, the Maboneng Precinct.

The precinct is a paragon of urban renewal. What was once an old and decaying cityscape has been retrofitted with steel, glass and concrete and given a second life.

The closer she gets to the epicentre of this art revival, the busier it gets, and soon she finds herself in a crowd. An assortment of flamboyant street performers shares the sun-soaked sidewalks with floral shirted tourists, groups of loitering teens and the homeless. In-line skaters whisk by, making you believe that humans can fly. Here wire work sculptors compete with high-art displayed on exposed-brick gallery walls. A beggar stands at the traffic light, his franchised message misspelt on his cardboard sign. Countercultures clique together, their extravagant fashions vibrant flowers against the Brutalism. The African highveld has come alive on one wall; a woman, 10 meters tall, wearing an African headwrap, smiles on another. The streets are filthy, hardly the ideal canvas for any renaissance. It is raw, the dark heart of art.

But Leda is not pleased with the inner-city revival unfolding around her. This is not what she wants. The dead-eyed warehouses and old slaughterhouses had reflected her inner landscape far better than this. This place, with its beautiful people and life-affirming things, forms a sharp contrast to the desolate wind that blows through her as through an empty alley. She pulls her hoodie lower over her face and digs her hands into its kangaroo pocket.

Her journeys into the Strata have made her corset habit largely irrelevant, and she barely bothers these days. But now, she longs for the restriction, that barrier between her and the world.

She weaves her way through the throngs of people. A silver-blue statue of flesh comes to life and whispers to her: "Do you want to know the answer to the ultimate secret?"

The statue-man freezes, one hand raised, his mouth half-open. But Leda has no money with which to unfreeze him, so the "answer to the ultimate secret" remains untold.

She feels a mixture of pity and disgust for these ignorant fools who are blissfully unaware of worlds beyond themselves. They know nothing of mingling miasmas and pulsating flesh creatures. Her secret fills her chest, flooding her fingers, pooling in her eyes for the world to see. But they don't see.

And at a level, she knows she's projecting. Their ignorance reflects her own inability to make sense of it all. Is it magic? A miracle? Perhaps it's just a simple sensory modality that can be explained with colour charts and graphs. And she so desperately yearns to unlock the secret. What is she supposed to do with this new knowledge? Is it a multi-dimensional scratch card of which she's only scratched the surface? Perhaps an infinite implosion of Matryoshka dolls? Deep in her heart, however, she fears that it is, in fact, turtles all the way down.

The aromatic smell of spices from across the continent lures her to the food court. Across counters, hands accept money in exchange for proudly South African bunny chow, prawn paella from Mozambique and fried Plantains seasoned with cayenne peppers and ginger from Ghana. A one-man orchestra wearing instruments as a mollusc does a shell sings songs about happy new beginnings and young love.

Suddenly aware of how tired she is, she sinks down onto a pastel-painted bench. The ache in her feet and her back, a welcome distraction. What was she thinking walking all this way? Following the trail of poorly drawn graffiti like it's the yellow brick road. What did she think she would find? Aerosol at the end of the trail dripping with words of wisdom? *Ja, domkop, that would be a hoot-toot-toot.*

Her eyes wander vacantly to a small crowd gathered close to the abutments of a bridge relaying traffic overhead. Enthralled by a street magician performing close-up magic, the small crowd crane their necks, their faces bright with anticipation. They are reeling to be amazed.

The magician himself is young, tall with a lean build. He's dressed simply in a t-shirt and jeans. There is a fedora on the dark hair that curls to his shoulders in Medusian fashion.

He's not theatrical, no glitter-infused *ta-da!* in this routine. Instead, his demeanour is subdued, understated which, when contrasted with his craft, lends him an unconventional charm.

She watches him disappear a watch, levitate a lady's handbag and pass a playing card through his hand. A young kid squeals with delight as he produces an oversized aspirin from a tiny bottle. His repertoire is not all that amazing. They are easy, crowd-pleasing parlour tricks, and Leda soon starts losing interest.

But then there is something about how he positions himself that captures her attention for a moment longer. He stands in the middle of the crowd, his arms stiff by his



sides. His voice is so low that the audience leans closer to hear. The silence surrounding him speaks of a grand finale about to happen.

And indeed, the next moment, his clothes billow midair, tumble to the ground in a heap, and the magician disappears into thin air. Like an afterthought, the fedora floats down on top of the pile of clothing.

The stunned silence deepens. Astonished audience members look about them in bewilderment. Then they erupt in exclamations of disbelief and awe.

“He’s gone!”

“He was right there!”

Many stoop to put money into the fallen fedora.

“How did he do that?”

“That’s crazy!”

For a moment, Leda shares in their confusion and searches all the faces in the crowd, but then it hits her ... Could it be?

Not wasting a moment, she weaves through the crowd to a nearby toilet stall. She locks the door and, hidden from prying eyes, slips into the Strata. It takes a few moments to adjust to the whirling forest of limbs, the miasma's so thick you can barely see through it, but she makes her way back to the fallen fedora and indeed-! There he is!

Where other people are ghostly skeletal outlines, he seems solid, a faint pink miasma shining inside his chest like bioluminescence.

*The magician is inside the Strata too.*

He starts moving, probably towards a second set of clothes stashed somewhere, she reasons, and sets off after him.

He winds his way through the crowd, choosing to sidestep people even though *through* them would be easier.

Leda almost loses sight of him when a group of people, a tour group of some kind, comes hurtling down the sidewalk towards her.

She freezes dead in her tracks as the horde descends like a freight train of flailing limbs and billowing miasma. She grabs her head and goes down on her haunches in a panic. She’s in a forest of blurring limbs, one big nebulous miasma curling and crackling about her head. She squeezes her eyes shut, holds her breath trying not to inhale the cloud, but it gets into her nose, her eyes, every pore of her being. And she is overcome by an eclectic explosion

of emotion – excitement, exhilaration, agitation and everything in between. It's like taking a hit of pure, unadulterated emotions that has been bottled at the source. So overcome by emotions is she that she almost loses sight of the magician completely. But the crowd moves on, and as the last stragglers move through her, the feelings subside as quickly as they came.

She catches up with the magician in front of the Jama Juice Bar. Her hand falls on his shoulder, and she says, "Hey, wait!" The shock of her hand and voice *inside* sends him reeling out of the Strata and back into the crowd. People gasp in shock. One woman clasps a hand over her child's eyes. Others reach for their mobile phones.

"Ha!" says the young magician, both hands angled to conceal his bits as he scampers behind a dustbin overflowing with rubbish. It is hard not to notice how well defined his body is, his limbs lean and strong.

*What to do?* Leda scrambles inside the Strata, she has no intention of emerging butt-naked in a crowd of people, but she doesn't want to lose the guy either. Making a decision, she hurries back to the toilet stall, and she can hear the groans and moans of displeasure from the queue that had formed outside the door. She frantically starts pulling on her clothes. She can't lose the guy. An urgent knock on the toilet stall door.

"Sorry, sorry!" she yells through the door, "almost done."

Buttons barely done she exits the stall to the loud cheer of those waiting in line. "Bad bunnychow," she mumbles and disappears in the direction of where she last saw the magician.

She catches up with him as he is making his hasty exit. Still barefoot, he had managed to make his way back to his jeans. The fedora, back on his head. The rest of his clothes clutched to his body.

"Scuse me!" says Leda, trying to keep pace with him.

"My bad, my bad," the magician says, not slowing his pace or looking up.

"Oi! Nice act, mate," someone yells after him, and the jab is followed by laughter. He humours the heckler with a jerk of his head and a smirk.

"No, wait, you don't understand ..." she says. Despite his languid gait, he moves extremely fast, covering lots of ground in a single step. They pass an art shop selling African ceramics. One selling postcard-size portraits portraying Jozi life. Clothing. A bead store. She struggles to keep up.

"Please!" she yells above the din of voices and djembe drums playing close by.

He stops abruptly and turns to her.

"Look, lady," he says as he starts pulling on his T-shirt, "that was just a major –," the t-shirt catches on the fedora and the outline of his face mumbles through the fabric, "fuckup, that happened out there. Just an accident, s'all."

"It's not that-," she says and pinches his shirt between thumb and forefinger and jerks it down, revealing his face.

"Could you just *listen*?" she scolds.

She notices his eyes. The pupil of his left eye is completely dilated, the black bleeding into the iris to fill it almost completely. The other is dark blue.

"Okay, what?" he says, hands on hips.

"Okay." She pauses for effect, then exhales the words like a big revelation: "It was me inside the Strata." Loud voices walk on down the street. The drums cease as if on cue, and the noise levels drop.

His eyes are caught in hers. "*Stratum*," he says softly.

"Huh?"

"*Stratum*. Singular."

"What?" Leda hisses, for she does not play well with others. "Is that all you have to say?"

He laughs, and it's her turn to stomp off.

"Fine," she says, "so much for serendipity."

His long fingers fold around her shoulder.

"Wait," he says, the laughter still in his face, "I'm just caught off guard, s'all. Humour is how I process, you see."

Swinging her around by her shoulders, he continues, "sorry, okay? Serendipity then?" An enormous grin spreads across his face. Somewhere in the background, more heckling:

"Hey, nice pork and beans!"

"Hey, Magic Mike!"

Someone else is not as good-humoured with, "you should be ashamed of yourself. There are children here!"

But to both Leda and the magician, everything else is just white noise now.

If you get used to the eye ... Leda thinks, looking up at him, he has a nice face. A comfortable face, a lived-in face. And when he smiles, a downright charming one.

But just as she is warming to him, his demeanour changes. His hands tighten on her shoulders. His eyes search the crowd.

“Are you alone?”

“What?” she shrugs his hands off her shoulders.

“Is there anyone else, here ... *inside*, I mean?”

“Anyone else? I’m alone. In fact, I’m the epitome of alone: my father is a miscreant, my aunt is a house, it seems ....”

“*They* can be here right now,” the magician says, his teeth clenched, “watching us from *inside*. You could have led them here!”

“Nobody followed me!” Leda barks. But despite her defiance, the hairs on her neck rise, goosebumps sweep across her skin. What if they are here? Whoever *they* are. Right now. Lurking beneath. Fingers poking inside of them. Watching her the way she watches her neighbours. She fights every urge not to submerge and check.

But when she answers, it’s with exasperation: “First you then Jeremy? Who is following us? Is it the FBI? The Illuminati? Gargamel?”

“Walk with me,” he says, his hand biting into her arm.

“Let go of me,” she hisses through clenched teeth.

“We can’t take any chances.”

“Are you going all *Beautiful Mind* on me?” she says, now a little frightened but allows him to pull her into a side street.

“Wow, you really don't know anything, do you?” he says, the lightness gone from his voice.

She looks at him dumbfounded, and the gaze he returns is one of pity.

“Okay, meet me here tomorrow night, 11pm,” he says and fishes a crumpled piece of paper out of his pants pocket, “park a way off. And come alone.”

“What’s this about?” she says as he’s already walking away.

“We have to go see a man about a dog.” Then, with a final throwing up of the horns, he disappears into the crowd.

Elsewhere in the city, only a few kilometres as the crow flies, Ian Sabien is feeding some ducks. In real estate brochures, there are always ponds and people feeding ducks. It seems to

be some symbol of good living, of an idyllic existence. So he thought he'd give it a try, see what the fuss is about.

There is little doubt that the Keen girl is submerging. In fact, he'd witnessed it himself. He saunters into her atmosphere every now and again, keeps his distance just to see what she's about.

He can't help but be a little intrigued by his subject. Apart from the broken doll quality, she's cute. Or perhaps because of it. She could have been one of "his girls" was it not for the fact that she is powerful beyond belief. He doesn't think she'd be difficult to recruit. The thing is, you have to approach these travellers carefully. They're like skittish fawns, ready to bolt at any moment.

But Leda Keen? Poor thing's life is a mess. And the deeper the hole they're in, the easier they grab the nearest paddle. Besides, he's already secured a little "incentive" to help make up her mind. Not that he'll need it. This one will be easy as pie.

He wipes his hands on the seat of his pants. Well, at least now he's tried the duck thing. He does not care for it.

# CHAPTER 8

## Don't be a dick

The address scribbled on the piece of paper takes Leda to a posh part of the city. Here bigger is better. Even the trees here are better than other trees. A Weimaraner yapping behind a fence is most certainly better than most.

She parks a few numbers down from the specified address and walks the rest of the way.

The magician is already there waiting, seated on a small wall outside the house. The fedora, she notices, and it irks her, is still present like a boil or a wart or some other undesirable addition a person can do without.

"Hey," she says, looking up at the house, which is multi-tiered like a wedding cake.

"Nice house," she says, "I'm guessing not yours."

"Nope," he says, launching himself off the wall, "not even close."

"What are we doing here?" she asks.

"I told you - "

"Right, see a man about a dog," she interrupts, "but what is the context? The backstory? What is the *dealio*?" Ugh, she cringes, *dealio*? #dadjokes.

"Well," he says, pushing the hat back from his forehead, "we are mending the universe. Righting the balance. Otherwise known as ..." he puts his hand on her elbow and takes them both into the Strata. His face, now cobalt blue, flashes a big smile at her and concludes, "...karma."

Leda scoffs at the unceremonious way he dragged her into the Strata. It feels intimate, almost non-consensual. After all, they are now, in effect, for all intents and purposes, by any measure, naked. He laughs at the look of displeasure on her face then heads towards the house.

"You coming?" he says.

Although he's right beside her, his voice sounds muffled and far off inside the Strata. His body in blue hue is limber and youthful, his movements unabashed. Once again, she is struck by his easy manner. The way his bones move as if at home in his skin, in this world.

"We're just gonna leave our clothes right there? On the sidewalk?" she calls after him. He just flashes another wicked smile and walks through the wall into the house. She sighs but follows him nonetheless.

Once inside, the magician is first to surface. Leda surfaces then slips an expensive-looking suit jacket from the back of an office chair over her shoulders. It's the jacket of a tall man and hangs to her knees, the sleeves enveloping her hands. A tall man with very expensive taste, she muses, relishing the fabric against her skin.

The same expensive taste has been applied to the house's interior. Marble, gleaming granite, chrome and glass feature throughout, tempered with warm wood and throws of rich organic textiles. A cowhide graces the natural stone flooring. The paintings blocked, not framed, feature what looks to her like Rorschach blots.

"So, why are we here?" she asks, the question secondary to her current consideration of one of the paintings. In the smudgy inkblot pattern, she sees two women bending at the waist to scoop water. No, a frog. No, a face grimacing. Leda is suspicious of modern art. It's a notion she shares with her father. The intelligence community, or so Jeremy often claims, introduced contemporary art to exert control over the masses. With this new generation of art, toilet bowls and period blood, interpretation is impossible. To make sense of it, you must defer to authorities. It teaches people not to think.

She becomes aware of the magician at her elbow. He cocks his head as he too studies the painting. "Ah, an Orc on a Harley Davidson." He states this as fact.

"Really?" she says, also cocking her head.

"I don't see it," she says. Then, "good God, could you cover up, please" He shrugs in that nonchalant manner but ties one of the throws around his waist like a sarong to keep the peace.

Leda picks up a small statue made from stone and turns it around in her hands. *What in God's name ...* The effigy's monstrous features are splayed in a manic smile while a tiny penis rests on ample thighs, which balloon into huge buttocks. She puts it back down on the desk, spins it around to face away from her. Unconsciously, she wipes her hand on the jacket.

"So," she says, "why are we here? Whose house is this?"

“A jerk,” he says as he rummages through a desk drawer.

Leda glares at her new companion. She wants to wrap her hands around his neck and shake a complete sentence from him like you would fruit from a tree. But he saves himself just in time.

“A real asshole. One of those who leave a dog in a car during a South African summer.”

“Okayyyyy ... and you’re what - the Patron Saint of Dogs in Cars?”

“Ah!” he says, lifting a magic marker into the air like a prize. “Perfect.”

“So, what? You go around punishing people for bad behaviour?”

“Nah, I just fuck with them a bit.” That contagious smile again.

On a wall, in giant black letters, he starts writing:

*Don't be a dic-*

“Who are you, people?” A voice booms behind them, making them jump.

It feels like an ice-cold bucket of water has been dumped over Leda. She turns towards the voice.

A gun emerges from the darkened corridor, on the end of it, a man who roughly resembles a potato with a line drawn on it for a mouth. He’s wearing pyjama pants and a t-shirt. The shirt spans across a barrel-shaped chest. The hand holding the gun is steadied by a forearm the size of a cantaloupe.

Leda glances at the magician and is confused to see him unfazed. In fact, he seems slightly annoyed.

“Aren’t you supposed to be at poker tonight?” the magician asks with an exasperation better suited to a parent addressing a badly-behaved child.

“Who-, how do you know -,” Potato-head starts, then pulls his already tiny eyes into slits, “Wait a minute ... I know you!” The man zooms in on the magician. His mouth pulls into a fleshy crease.

“*You!* You smashed my window! You’re the goddamn idiot who smashed-!” Now, even more purposefully, Potato-head thrusts the gun at Leda’s companion. “What are you doing in my house?”



By now, the gun is mere inches from the magician's face, but the young man just cocks a smile in response. But, of course, his nonchalant manner serves only to agitate Potato-head more.

“What do you want?!” Spit flies from the man’s mouth.

The animal part of Leda’s brain sends blood flowing to her limbs. Her hands and feet prickle pins and needles. She must do something. This has gotten out of hand. They should just submerge, run! But the magician’s following words are a clear indication that he is not inclined to do so.

He says, “Re-“, his index finger swats distractedly at the business end of the gun in his face, “-ci-, “swipe, “-pro-,” swipe, “city.”

*My God, the guy has a death wish.* Slipping into the Strata is quick. But quicker than a bullet? Leda doesn’t think so.

Potato-head brings his other hand to the gun to steady it. His thumb quivers on the hammer. A dog starts barking at the back door.

It is adrenaline that moves Leda’s body. In the gun guy’s periphery, she slips into the Strata. As she moves towards the man, she hears the magician say: “Reciprocity, the Golden Rule, mate, is all I’m saying.”

Silently Leda surfaces behind Potato-head; the stone statue fits firmly in her hand. But her foot makes a shuffling sound on the carpet, and the man and the gun swing wildly towards her like a weathercock in a sudden gust.

Without thinking, the statue comes down and connects with the crest of Potato-head’s skull.

For one, two, three seconds, nothing happens. The three of them are frozen in place. With a clinical coldness, Leda notes the rust inside the barrel of the gun. Abstractedly she wonders whether that would enhance the chances of a bullet wound getting infected.

Then the man slides to the floor like a sheet of paper.

Leda and the magician stare at one another for a moment. Then down at the man on the floor.

*Shit balls.*

“That’s going to leave a mark,” the magician says eventually.

Leda starts to freak. “CPR! I can’t remember-! Is it airway, compression, breathing? Or is it compression, airway, breathing?”

"He doesn't need CPR. We just gotta stop the blood," says the magician. He takes Leda by the shoulders and finds her eyes with his, "okay? Okay."

Looking into his face, Leda gets the undeniable feeling that everything is going to be alright. She takes a deep shuddering breath and nods.

"Okay," he says and releases her shoulders. He then rummages in the desk drawers again and produces a roll of duct tape from them. "A-ha!"

Leda looks about the room for something absorbent. The only thing at hand is a throw pillow. As the magician applies pressure to the unconscious man's head with the pillow, Leda wraps tape under his chin, over, under, over under until the pillow has been securely fastened.

They stand back to examine their handiwork.

"That should work," says Leda, sounding anything but certain.

"Sure," says the magician, his tone echoing her doubt.

Suddenly, like a well-tanned Nosferatu, the man's eyes fly open and, staring at them wildly, he starts to flay. He swings at the air, his fingers gnarled into claws, the hands of a drowning man set to take down everyone and everything with him. *Twak!* His hand connects with the magician's cheekbone; splits open Leda's lip on the follow-through.

Without them conferring, the young magician throws his own body across the struggling man's chest while Leda starts taping his arms to the floor. His fury at the restraints escalates into a violent full-body wiggle but to no avail. There is blood in her mouth, on her chin. The taste of copper cents is lodged in her throat. But she doesn't pause. Instead, she continues to secure layers of the tape across the man's arms and legs. She doesn't stop until he is caught in a cocoon of silver duct tape. And by the time Leda secures the final piece of tape to the man's feet, he's conceded defeat and just lies there breathing heavily through the blood drying in rivulets down his face.

When he speaks, his voice is low, menacing, little more than a growl: "You'll be sorry ...."

*Silence is golden, but duct tape is silver.* She remembers hearing that somewhere but fails to recall where. She puts the last strand of tape across his mouth.

Leda and her accomplice stand in silence over the duct tape-mummy.

"So, what now?" she says.

The magician looms over the man on the floor, “hey buddy, sorry it came to this ...” he says and pulls the cap off the sharpie, “but you really shouldn’t leave pets in cars in the heat”. His lean shoulders obscure her view, so Leda can't see what he’s drawing.

Eyes made of tiny slits flash at him over the strip of silver duct tape.

The magician straightens up and shares a smile with Leda, “and now,” he says, “we run.” And they do.

The story that Potato-head would have to tell the police later, and friends and family for years to come, is that two delinquents assaulted him, taped him to the floor, wrote ‘don’t be a dick’ on his forehead and then added an old-timey moustache under his nose in black sharpie. And then they vanished. Poof! Like that. *Literally*. Into thin air.

Because that is precisely what happens. Leda and the magician slip into the Strata and out of the house. They surface to sweep up their clothes on the pavement, and now they are running in the real world.

They know full well there is no one after them. They are running for the sheer joy of it. They run in that way in which adults rarely do. That way reserved for children and beasts. They run like Lola ran that day. Like Dixie at Midnight. Through alleyways and walkways and one-ways, they run. Adrenaline, youth, elation gush through them. As they run, Leda steals a glance at her new companion and sees nothing but sheer exhilaration in his face.

It is only in the park at 24th and Loerie that they eventually collapse into a heap. They laugh until it feels as if their hearts will give out. They lie flat on their backs, breath leaving their bodies like smoke signals, and the laughter eventually quiets down.

The magician turns his face towards hers.

“Will,” he says, “my name is Will.”

“Will ...” she says. The name fits comfortably on her tongue. “Hi, Will. I'm Leda.”

“Leda?” he says.

“Gmf, a goddess whose only claim to fame is copulating with a swan,” says Leda with a wry smile.

“Leda ...” says her new friend, Will, “is also the name of a small Jupiter moon.”

# CHAPTER 9

## Paper menagerie

The next time they meet, it's at Will's flat. From the hanging mat serving as a bed to the duffel bag spewing a trail of clothes on the floor, everything about the place says its inhabitant travels light. The walls are bare. An old sheet, a repeating sailboat motif on it, serves in place of curtains.

But between the bare walls and fading sailboats, Leda discovers beauty. Kneeling on the floor, she brings her face level with a Stegosaurus, a few fingers high, folded in exquisite detail from paper. Every fold is perfectly executed, each frill tucked fan-style, its head faultlessly symmetrical. It is not alone. Forming an entourage behind it - across the floor, over and across a pile of books and onto the windowsill - a tribe of assorted natural and mythical beasts stand patiently in their paper perfection. Lions, cows, flamingos, a unicorn, a bull are among them; a phoenix, wings spread into glorious flames, a donkey, some cats – some darling, some majestic – are also among the throng.

“You do these?” asks Leda, ‘how long have you been making these?’

“Since I got here, mmmm, three months ago,” he shrugs, picking up a flamingo made from a crossword puzzle and gently smooths down the crease on one wing. “I should get out more, right?”

Leda recognises a vulnerability behind the self-effacement.

“They’re amazing,” she assures him.

“I always start a new flock at a new place. Leave these. It’s my version of a garden. Maybe the next people in this God damn depressing shithole will find them amusing.”

Leda examines his face for a moment. The guy has a way of being in the world that makes it impossible not to like him. It’s as if somewhere, a seaside town had taken human form to walk among the people.

“Why? Why leave them?”

He gets up and walks over to the fridge, “Shit, I only have one beer. Mind sharing? I dunno why ... maybe because we all wanna leave something, you know? Mine is just some

stupid paper petting zoo, but it's something." Leda wonders what she'll leave behind one day. She examines a tiny swallow folded from a ticket stub, then palms it and disappears it into her back pocket just as Will sits down next to her again.

She takes the beer he's offering. Its malty taste fills her mouth.

"Don't you get tired of moving all the time?" Leda asks, passing the beer bottle back to him. It's a concept she can't relate to at all. Her whole adult life has been about stability. About finding perpetuity. She thinks of her box labelled "life ephemera." She could never leave it behind. Those little shreds of paper, serviettes and hotel coasters, they're like signposts. Like markers of her life. Proof that she exists.

After a moment, he answers, "It's all I know. I've never had reason to stay. I guess in a way."

Just as the silence threatens to become awkward, Will looks down at Leda's sandaled feet and says, "I like your toes. They have no hair on them."

"Um, thank you?" she says

"Of course, ..." he says, "that could be a sign of heart disease."

"Okay," Leda says, because what else?

"So," says Will, "what do you wanna do?"

She doesn't have to think about it too long. The idea has been taking shape for a while, "I have some unfinished business...."

"Ha! Revenge!" he says it like a pronouncement, a declaration.

And so, Leda returns to the place where it all started. This time, with Will by her side.

From inside the Strata, they walk through the spaces that have become a symbol of her failures, *Sax & Ash Advertising Emporium*. But standing there now, she's strangely unaffected by it. As if all the power of this place, these people, is gone.

Like mischievous spectres Leda and Will flit through the building. They're the ghosts of Christmas past, the imps of the perverse. They are the winds of change, the sands of time. They are Harlequin, come to set things right. They are the hot, invisible breath of petty revenge. They have a ticket to see it all, a backstage pass to the universe. They have access to the world's number one peepshow.

Their antics are designed to creep people out, cause confusion or plain irritation. They surface for brief moments to knock over a stack of files, to spew off a thousand copies

of naked butts on the photocopier and to rearrange the creative director's Troll collection into lurid positions.

*In your face, Leoni Meyer, for hijacking my client account that time.*

*Fuck you, Dev Nasir, for gossiping behind my back.*

*Take that, Missy Mayfair, for always having the perfect hair.*

Leda knows this is probably not the best use of her time or this gift, or whatever you want to call it. But what else is there?

When the creative director opens the door to his office, he can *swear* that for a second, there were naked figures standing at his desk. He shakes his head and wipes at his eyes. A trick of the light, he decides.

He looks down at his desk.

"What the hell ...."

On the *inside*, Leda and Will are doubled over with laughter. They stick around for a moment as the creative director picks a pink-haired troll doll from the orgy where it was being fellated by a green-haired one.

Grabbing Will's hand Leda leads him through the rest of the offices.

In front of one door, Leda pauses. Of course, from *inside*, it is not a physical barrier but a mental one. The door is barely discernible, the plaque on it even less so. The name printed on it is altogether invisible. But Leda knows precisely what it says.

"What does it say?" asks Will, noticing the look on her face.

She lifts her hand as if to touch the plaque, but it passes through seamlessly.

"Decher ... Decher Holt".

"What kind of a name is that? Decher?" says Will with scorn.

She chuckles but still seems far off. "It's a portmanteau ... of his parents' names ... Delia and Archer: De-cher." "Well," shrugs Will, "could have been worse ... his parents could have been named Syd and Phyllis ...."

Leda starts laughing, but they are distracted by voices coming down the hall. Leda leads Will through the door into the office.

She'll recognise Decher's voice anywhere.

The man she once thought she loved enters the office with a tall woman. They walk in step, their bodies in sync and engaged in conversation. He closes the door behind them.

Leda recognises the woman. She had started as an intern at the firm a few months before Leda's ejection. Their interactions had been limited to the handing over of light skimmed chai lattes and hastily scribbled phone messages. But she had seemed nice enough if one disregarded the excessive hair tossing and the work of an overzealous orthodontist that gave her an oversized smile.

The man and the younger woman stand facing each other. Their bodies angled in alignment. Heads cocked to one side. Their attraction, palpable. A mirrored image in love with itself.

Like watching a rerun of a familiar movie, Leda watches as Decher reaches out and tucks a strand of hair behind the woman's ear. It is a familiar gesture. Right here, now she can almost feel the lightness of his fingers brush past her ear. A gesture designed to make you feel like the only one in the world. She used to be that girl. She is sick to her stomach. He unfurls that special smile she'd thought he reserved for her. Her head is light, but she can't look away.

Although their bodies are not touching, their miasmas are reaching towards one another. Tentatively at first, as if tasting the air, they lap up against one another like waves touching the shore. It becomes more urgent, tentacles in a nightmarish hentai fanfiction, their miasmas explore each other's bodies, probing, caressing, enveloping before becoming entwined like two swans necking. And it is the most intimate thing that Leda has ever seen. But still, she cannot look away.

She hears Will calling. He sounds so far.

"Hm, sorry?" she says.

He's watching her, and she knows the horror is written plainly on her face.

"Maybe we should sneak up behind them and stick a rude note on their backs," says Will. "Or we could cut her hair off."

*Or, sever his Achilles heel,* Leda thinks only half-jokingly.

"Wanna see something cool?" Will says, his own miasma leaping like flames suddenly fuelled.

Leda nods then watch him reach into the tall girl's chest, his fingers taking hold of the squirming miasma inside of her.

He retrieves his hand. The miasma changes in his hand. It becomes more concrete, tangible. Sticky, like candy floss. Stringy. He gives her a moment to look at it, but only a

moment before he starts shaking the stringy substance from his hand. In turn, the living strands seem to fight their expulsion, curling, twisting, slithering their way up Will's arm. A parasite looking for a host. Will flings it to the ground where it sizzles for a moment, sputters, then grows still and turns grey like ash.

"What was that?" Leda's eyes ask of Will, "What did you do?"

*You know*, he says back wordlessly, his eyes imploring.

In Leda's mind, the dots connect themselves. And she knows that those luminous clouds are not souls; they are real, raw emotions. Suddenly she understands it's not arbitrary that you feel fear in the pit of your stomach, love in your chest, lust is in the loins; that the butterflies that cavort in your gut when you're nervous or anxious are whirling, crackling, sizzling clouds of mist that gather right there in the pit of your stomach.

Leda turns her attention back to the couple just in time to see the girl, a new, mild orange miasma igniting inside of her, making a curt apology and excusing herself from the room.

Decher Holt remains standing in the middle of the office. His face is blank with confusion. And although she knows it's superficial solace, Leda finds great pleasure in seeing his miasma, unreciprocated and confounded, shrivel and squirm midair.

When dawn breaks, Leda and Will are sitting on top of the Hillbrow Tower, looking out over the Johannesburg skyline. Goddamn, what a city.

They say cities have human personalities. If that's true, then Johannesburg is proudly unemployed, unimpressed and all lit up behind the wheel of its souped-up 82' Beamer and blaming you for the skid-marks on the front lawn.

Ponte, the Brixton Tower, Carlton Centre jut from the earth like fingers from a hand. Far below them, music and people spill from smoke-filled bars, their laughter faint like bells in the night. At more than 200 meters up in the air, they are barely aware that the tower is swaying. For, like people, buildings not only contend with the vertical force of gravity but also the horizontal force of relentless winds.

Leda wants to talk about the colours, the colours inside of people. She wants to process this new bit of information that she's learnt. What does it mean?

"Loneliness ..." says Will, "some forms of it, sit here, right here ..." he taps the space below his clavicle with two fingers, "...have you ever felt that?"



Her own fingers find the spot above her heart. She *does* know that pain. It is a different hurt from the one that stings your eyeballs when the dog dies in the movie. It is different from the one that sits in your stomach when you lie awake in the small hours of the morning worrying about the meaning of it all.

“That thing you did was crazy,” says Leda, “with the colours, the *miasma* ... uh, with that girl’s emotions.”

Will lowers his head.

“You’ll want to be careful with that,” he says softly as if retrospectively ashamed of his actions. “We shouldn’t be messing with that stuff.”

A thought occurs to Leda then.

“But what if that *is* our purpose? What if we’re *meant* to clean up the world of messy emotions or make people less sad, or I dunno, give people happiness. Does it work that way? I’m sure it can work that way!”

“It’s dangerous. For everyone,” Will says abruptly. “For starters, it’s contagious sorta ... like an infection, you know. Mob mentality, bandwagons, couples who kill, cults ....”

Leda remembers how the stuff had tried to sidle back up Will’s arm.

He continues, “Besides, best keep low. If the world finds out what we can do ... well, that won’t end well for us.”

“That’s a bit melodramatic, don’t you think?” says Leda.

“Melodramatic? You know why they burnt up the Salem witches instead of hanging or drowning them?”

She snorts incredulously, “surely you don’t mean they were like us ....”

“Because *fire*,” he says, “is the only thing that cuts into the Strata. The only thing we cannot pass through.”

“You’re not saying that the witch-hunts had anything to do ....”

“Not just there, all over the world. The witchfinders in Asia, the witchsmellers in Africa ... But then again, maybe it’s just stories. Who knows. But I can tell you, nothing burns like white fire inside the strata.”

The morning’s orange tinge promises rain and soon delivers on the promise. The two of them sink into the Strata and lie there as the sheets of rainfall fall around them. It is surreal seeing the downpour, smelling the rain, hearing the rain yet being unaffected by it.

Whenever they surface for a breath, the drops pummel their bare skins but only for a moment before they sink back into the Strata.

When they look up, it seems the rain is falling from a single point in the sky. And Leda can't help but wonder whether everything in the universe is, in fact, fated to spiral towards the Omega Point.

That night Leda dreams of grassy hills rolling into desert dunes, rolling into snow caps rolling into sharp, rugged rocky outcrops. These 'scapes of many seasons and places are stippled by pyres of raging white fires. And from deep within the flames, screaming, like she's never heard before.

# CHAPTER 10

## Serendipitous

Leda and Will. Will and Leda. They become inseparable. Whether it's the secret they share or their alienness in the world which ties them, who knows. Maybe it's the sheer improbability that in a universe of two trillion galaxies, seven quintillion grains of sand, 7000 million people and innumerable possibilities, they'd find each other. That type of serendipity is not to be taken lightly. And for all her scepticism about gods and angels, aromatherapy and acupuncture, crystals and karma, *serendipity* is one thing Leda believes may well hold some truth.

This thing they can do, this gift, offers a world of possibilities. To them, nothing is off-limits. This is the montage: they crash elite parties, clubs, launches, shows. They raid the kitchens of five-star restaurants. They swivel in the red judges' chairs on the set of a certain TV talent competition. They visit the carefully guarded Green Vault, where they wade through ancient treasures, *objects d'art*, cabinets of curiosity, baroque contraptions, and general royal weirdness. They go to those places as packed with pseudo-celebrities as cellulite on the un-Photoshopped thigh of a plus-sized model.

But they are master-less apprentices. Unskilled alchemists. Amateur scientists let loose in a laboratory stacked high with ACME explosives. Like little lost gods, they're drunk on power, and they drink straight from the bottle. It leaves them breathless, wanting more.

It's a few weeks into their shared adventure when their hands eventually touch, and their eyes become quiet within each others'. And in a soft click, unplanned and uninvited, the pieces fit perfectly into place.

They tumble in and out of the Strata, their passion hypnotic, trancelike, surreal. The blue rushes in to wash away the coloured world, only to be replaced by colour once more. Again and again, until the two worlds blur into something else entirely. Under their fingers, flesh turns from palpable, primitive flesh to something cooler, barely tangible, barely real, but equally intoxicating.

And after, sitting naked across from each other, their faces still flushed, they both laugh conspiratorially as he carves a heart shape into his arm. But he cuts too deep, and she fetches a towel to stop the bleeding. Still, they both giggle like fairy folk drunk on each other and the warm night. And lost in that finely spun moment, as real and as brief as an intake of breath, he is the love of her life.

# CHAPTER 11

## Pressed by the black

Leda wakes to the shrill sound of the phone; stirs in Will's arms. The digital clock glows 5.25 at her in the dark. She carefully lifts Will's hand off her and places it gently at his side.

She answers the phone in a soft whisper, "Hello?"

A smile touches her lips when she notices that Will has fallen asleep with his fedora still on.

A man's voice. She listens for a moment.

The line is crystal clear, but she asks him to please repeat that. She listens for another moment, her face creasing into a look of puzzlement.

"Where did you say?" She scribbles something down on a notepad. Quickly and quietly, she gets dressed and hurries out the door, leaving Will asleep in the bed.

Twenty minutes later, Leda pulls up in front of a three-storey building in the *cul de sac* of a leafy suburb. Here homes perch neatly on their property lines, and big trees rain purple Jacaranda flowers onto the sidewalk.

A smartly dressed security guard marches towards her, a real pep in his step. His manner is cordial. His uniform is crisp and new. He tends to her as if he's been waiting for her all his life.

"This way, please," he says, showing her towards the entrance.

"Uh, thanks."

"It's my pleasure, Miss Keen."

The inside of the clinic is unlike any she has ever seen. Her feet sink into the luxurious carpet as she walks past armoires and settees decked out in fine brocades and Damask weaves. An alabaster stairway with a railing curving up towards the European-style plastered ceiling is lit by sconces along the way. Bevelled mirrors reflect her terse, pale face back at her.

To Leda's surprise, the lady at reception is also expecting her.

"Good day," she says with bright lips, "are you Miss Keen? On the first floor, the door to your right."

Her hand on the wooden railing, Leda ascends the stairs.

Here, on the first floor, it feels more like a hospital with the requisite linoleum floor and the smell of steriliser in the air. But still, everything is so new, the linoleum unscuffed; the walls, perfectly white.

A man in a doctor's coat greets her at the top of the stairs. His skin is so white he looks like an overexposed photograph, the whiteness flattening out the curves of his face to make him look featureless except for two pitch-black nostrils, like raisins, in the centre of his face.

"Hello, Miss Keen?" he says, his tongue and gums a sudden flash of pink in all that whiteness, "I'm Doctor Kruger."

"Yes ... doctor," she says, "where is my father?"

Premature baldness encouraged him to shave the remainder of his hair down to the scalp. The unforgiving overhead lights accentuate the heavily pronounced parietal bone of his skull, creating the illusion that he may well be sporting two brains instead of one.

"Through those doors," he says, pointing towards a pair of heavy swing doors, "but I thought we could talk in my office first?"

Leda follows him on a short walk to the office. There is something insect-like about the way the man moves. Like a praying mantis. His long limbs seem to move with an unnatural range of motion while the rest of his body remains quite still. Each movement starts off sluggish, only to be concluded in a sudden, swift action.

She finds his demeanour unsettling. Slightly off-kilter like the lid of a jar just off its track. But she dismisses her unease, attributes it to the strangeness of the situation.

His office again is an exercise in opulence. The same bronze sconces as in the lounge keep guard over a shiny dark-wood desk. Noticing her glances around the room, the doctor says, "Solid mahogany. Straight from Bali. The clinic has a very generous benefactor. Please sit," he points her to a wingback chair across the desk, "which allows this clinic to exist at all."

"What is this place?" asks Leda.

"*The Somnia* is a research facility," the doctor says and plants himself on the edge of his desk, looking down at her. "We treat sleeping disorders. Your father has a unique ... sleep disorder. One we study."

Perched on top of the desk like that, his hands steeped under his chin, he seems even more like a giant mantis with its forelegs folded in raptorial prayer.

“A sleep disorder? You mean the one where you can fall asleep unexpectedly, and they make you wear a helmet to eat soup?”

He looks at her quizzically, unsure whether she’s joking, but proceeds anyway.

“Uh, no, not narcolepsy. What your father has is more ... rare.”

She doesn't say anything but swallows hard, her hands gnawing at one another on her lap.

The doctor continues, “there are different names for it, Spindle sickness, Oneiroid syndrome ... Unfortunately, despite its plethora of names, we know very little about the disease.”

Leda listens. She’s heard about sleep disorders. Researching an advertising campaign for some miracle sleep drug, she’d learnt about a creature in Swahili folklore that sits on the chest of a sleeper, making it difficult to breathe. *Jinamizi*, they call it. *To be strangled by jinn*.

“But he was fine. Showed no signs, no symptoms,” says Leda.

The doctor nods gravely but doesn’t volunteer any more information.

In Morocco, they talk about a sleep paralysis called *bou rattat*. They say a demon presses down on your covers at night, making it impossible to move or speak.

“But he will be okay, right?”

A pause then, diplomatically, the doctor starts feeling around for the right words: “It’s best ... I prepare you, Miss Keen, no one ... recovers from it. It is a chronic condition, as far as we can tell.”

“Is he going to die?”

“No, he’s stable. It’s just that he is in a ... coma. Of sorts.”

“A coma?”

“Of sorts. It’s more a catatonic stupor ... yes, that’s a better way of describing it.”

In the US, sleepers are visited by the Night Hag. In Mongolia, it’s called *Khar darakh* – ‘to be pressed by the black’, the dark side personified.

“How will we afford this?” she says, looking about her.

“Well, that’s the good news ... as part of the programme, your father will receive the best possible treatment.”

Still unsure what those words mean, Leda frowns. “Can I see him?”

The doctor sighs and nods and then says, “I have to warn you, Miss Keen, some of the patients may seem ... agitated. Of course, we keep them comfortable from the pain ... but about the dreams ... well, that we can’t do much about.”

The doctor leads her to a medium-sized ward. There are five hospital beds lined up on either side, nine out of the ten occupied.

Under white sheets, the dreamers twitch and mewl softly. Two large orderlies lift a patient from a bed in one corner while a nurse changes the sheets.

In one of the furthest corners, a guest sits with his back to the door next to one of the beds. His head bowed, his hand on that of the patient in the bed in front of him. He doesn’t look up when they enter.

“I can assure you, your father is stable,” the doctor says and directs her to bed nine. Leda gasps audibly when she sees her father. He lies flat on his back, his head on the pillow, still and unmoving except for the rapid eye movements behind lids that are translucent, like rice paper. Thin blue veins stand out starkly against the paleness of his skin. Behind him, machines beep his vitals. She can’t name what she’s feeling. It’s a mixture of fear and sadness, shame and anger, and tenderness. She wonders what her miasma looks like from within the Strata.

“What’s wrong with his eyes?” she asks.

The doctor sinks down until he is at face level with the sleeping man. He cocks his head, and his expression seems almost to be one of fascination. The gesture appears off to Leda. But then again, so does this whole situation.

“It’s just oculo-lyric crises, uh, reactions. It’s perfectly normal.” The doctor’s voice is a murmur as if he’s really just considered this for himself.

Not being able to take her eyes off her father’s pale face, Leda asks: “so they just stay like this forever?”

He nods. “Until we know more about it. Maybe one day, we’ll find a cure. All we can do is keep them comfortable in the meantime...”

The patient with the visitor grows restless. She wrestles her sheets as if wrangling the night hag from her chest.

When the agitation turns to violent thrashing, the visitor stands up and steps to one side: “Doctor! My sister ..?” he says anxiously. And despite the look of distress on his face, Leda can't help but notice he’s incredibly handsome.



A nurse moves swiftly to inject a pale amber liquid into the patient's IV. Her movements cease, and she grows quiet.

"Don't be alarmed," the doctor says quickly, "we do everything we can to keep them peaceful."

"Is she ... okay?" Leda asks, her gaze wandering from the patient to her father, whose face had started to twitch. "What's happening to them? Are they conscious? Can they hear us?"

A beat passes before the doctor answers: "They're dreaming, that's all. We like to think they're good dreams. But they're most probably kaleidoscopic in nature. Shapes, colours that sort of things, abstractions."

Almost indiscernibly, the doctor gestures for the nurse then stands back to inject something into Jeremy's line. His facial muscles relax almost instantly, the movement behind his eyes grows still.

"Just a little sedative," the doctor says, and then, "but I'll leave you with your father for a while, stay as long as you wish."

At the door, he pauses and turns back to her, "Miss Keen, I know this is hard, but at least ..." he sweeps his hand across the room, "at least this is the best place for him under these circumstances."

Leda watches him leave. The door swings shut behind him. His absence brings immediate relief.

Her attention turns back to her father. She's never seen him this still. His usual sleep is fitful, as if his body has somewhere else to be. But now, he's so unmoving. His breathing so low, the rise and fall of his chest under the sheet a mere whisper.

Despite it all, she loves him deeply. It's not a love nurtured from memories, shared moments, or sacrifice; grown from time or closeness or need. It's a love forged by the hydrogen bonds of their DNA, the shared scars of genetic memory. She didn't have a say in the matter; it will always be.

Leda only looks up when the handsome stranger gets up from his post and walks past her towards the door. She realises she was wrong about him. He's not handsome. He's beautiful. They share small, terse nods as he passes.

When Leda eventually leaves her father's bedside, she feels empty, hollow like a grain hull sucked dry by the wind.

In a daze, she walks through the lounge towards the exit.

“Miss Keen!” nods an orderly in passing.

“See you soon, Miss Keen,” says a nurse.

She has done her best to control things in her life, all hospital corners and spirit levels. But despite her best efforts, everything has come undone. Her job, now her father. Even this thing with Will spells nothing but disaster, surely.

Then Leda’s sense of dread takes physical form. There is something, someone in her path. She staggers backwards as if repelled by an invisible force field, the hulking presence unmoving, a looming shape up ahead.

When she looks up, it is directly into the face of a woman who is not very tall but *is* inordinately fat. She has the look of an ancient fertility goddess statue, a roughly sculptured silhouette carved from coarse grey stone but with a raw savageness; vicious, unhinged sexuality that conjures images of blood sacrifice and man-eating vulvas.

Their eyes meet, and the chill in the nape of Leda’s neck ossifies. It’s not the woman’s sallow, joyless appearance that’s disturbing. Or even Leda’s unsolicited notion of her hungry sex. But it’s the way she stares unashamedly. As if she’s stripped the veneer of modern civility from her gaze and now lopes broad-knuckled and uninvited into your flesh to peer at your soul.

The hum of the aircon grows inordinately loud and very close. The oxygen in the air, thin. Leda is vaguely aware that the receptionist with the bright lips is watching the interaction from behind her desk.

And then, as if in the world’s most awkward dance with the world’s most unyielding partner, Leda skirts her way around the woman.

She hurries the last few steps out of the clinic’s foyer, past the receptionist, who watches her exit wordlessly.

This day has just been too much, Leda tells herself. Instead of plain boorish people, she sees bogeymen. Nonetheless, a little shudder rifles through her body.

Time does what it's always done; it goes on.

Leda visits *The Somnia* often. She has come to like the place despite its solemn disposition. The whiteness of its walls, the clipped sound of the nurses’ footsteps, the shine of the buttons on the guard’s uniform. A place for everything and everything in its place. It’s

almost like a well-rehearsed play, a meticulously coordinated dance. And for once, she knows the steps.

This place is the one thing she doesn't share with Will. There is no particular reason for this. Just an escape hatch, an ejection seat, you know? Just in case. With selfish jealousy, she guards her time here like a model ship perfectly preserved inside a bottle. It's just the lines of their lives have become so blurred, so entangled that she must keep this one thing, *one thing*, for herself.

The clinic had been curiously devoid of other visitors. In fact, apart from the handsome man and the stout, frightful woman Leda'd encountered that first day she hasn't seen anyone besides the staff and patients. This observation is not lost on her, but she prefers it that way, so she doesn't question it. It feeds into the feeling of this place as a refuge explicitly tailored for her.

And Jeremy? Maybe it's self-delusion, the easy way out, but Leda finds peace in knowing that at least at *The Somnia*, he's safe from his own wilful destruction. Like a toy kept in its packaging to preserve the sheen. She likes imagining that he's living his life in a self-designed simulation. That his dreams are so rich and vivid that they beat any reality he may perpetrate on himself.

And, if she is honest, she's relieved for herself. Jeremy, who has always been a source of destruction in her life, has been neutralised. The storm contained. And she wasn't even the one who had to put the genie back in the bottle.

Besides, he'd become a much better listener overnight.

So, in this mess of shame, guilt and yes, relief, Leda finds contentment. She's even started thinking about picking up a paintbrush again. She can almost feel the buttery consistency of the paint under her brush. Feel the amazement as the thing in her mind takes shape outside of it.

She spends more time in this world, rediscovering those simple things – the caffeinated goodness of the brew at her new favourite coffee shop right around the corner from *The Somnia*; the friendly but brief exchanges with the locals hanging out there.

"You look happy today," says one of the patrons, a man with longish bangs and exotic eyes, the plate in front of him cleared of every crumb of toast and preserve.

"You know what?" Leda says, "I think I'm okay."

"Well," says the man, "it suits you." And then, "you really should try the watermelon preserve; it's of another world!"

They talk some more. It makes her feel normal. It's nice to let your guard down sometimes. Just shoot the breeze with a fellow human being.

One morning she leaves Jeremy's bedside and heads for the coffee machine in the guest foyer. With its multiple buttons, it's one of those contraptions that spew out anything from plain boiling water to triple chai macchiato. Regrettably, every cup tastes like bathwater and bitter regret.

She's busy sipping what is supposedly a cappuccino when she looks up and into the face of Christopher Quin, the handsome visitor whose visits had coincided surprisingly accurately with hers. They haven't spoken apart from glances and nods. But she'd discovered his name through some gentle enquiry. Christopher, Chris, Quin – the perfect, almost too perfect, name for him.

He's almost always there, bow-headed, fingers steeped solemnly at his sister's bed, a study in contemplation. An artist's rendering of quiet suffering. He always acknowledges her with a small smile and an almost imperceptible nod. The weight of shared burden passing wordlessly between them.

Chris Quin comes to a standstill in front of her. He's a little shorter than she'd imagined him to be. A little stockier. But his face, oh God, his face, is every bit as good-looking as she'd thought it to be that first day. Pretty almost. It would be heart-shaped if not for the set jaw culminating in a chin so cleft it's almost a cliché.

"What?" he says self-consciously, his hand going to his face, "something on my chin?"

"Sorry?" she says, realising she's been staring. "No, no, uh, it's just humans are the only creatures that have chins, did you know?"

*Ugh. Facepalm.*

He looks at her for a moment, then throws his head back and laughs. The sound, cushioned by the plush furnishings and luxurious carpets, sounds warm and intimate.

Why good-looking people moved her so Leda couldn't tell. Even old Leather-patches had alluded to it through his plumes of smoke. He called her preoccupation with beauty *pathological*

"It's because," he'd say, "you rarely got any nice thing as a child ... Something shiny, new." She thought about her one-eyed bear that had been her companion throughout her

childhood, its matted hair and bits of white stuffing oozing from one ear. It was always hand-me-downs, communal property and last-minute birthday gifts, a box of matches, packets of condiments from a diner, and once an enchanted ten-cent coin that was supposedly imbued with magic if she'd just *believe*. So, she is in awe of nice things. She wants to be worthy of having something nice, a sort of "narcissism aimed outside the own ego," he'd called it. He then spent ten minutes flattening his eyebrows in the oval mirror behind his desk.

Looking at this specimen in front of her and feeling her heart race, maybe old Leather-patches hadn't been such a loon after all.

Chris Quin is just the kind of handsome that captures her - fresh off the *Abercrombie and Fitch* assembly line, strong-jawed, generously fringed with dewy skin. Something someone else wants but she gets to have.

The visitor smiles warmly and then presses a button on the coffee machine, which *splooches* black fluid into a cup.

"Why is it," he says, "no matter what button you press, it always gives you sludge?"

Leda manages a chuckle as she searches her mental repertoire for non-chin related talk.

Thankfully he fills the silence: "I wonder what they dream about ...." His eyes dart back to the ward, then he continues, "I like to think Libs, Libby, dreams about New York Fashion Week. That was her thing before the illness ... you know..."

If that is the case, then Jeremy is sitting nipple-deep in a Hieronymus Bosch painting snarfing liquid cocaine from Charlie Sheen's bellybutton as if it's the 90s. But Leda only thinks this and says instead: "I sure hope so ...."

"Are you okay?" he says suddenly, his fine face in a frown.

"Uh, yes. Fine."

"Oh, okay... you just turned white as a sheet."

"Uh ... yes, no, I don't know ... I do feel a bit weird."

"Do you want to sit down?"

"I'm sure it will pass," she tries waving it away.

But instead of passing, a bizarre feeling sidles through her body. She presses two fingers to her throat. She presses her palm against the pit of her stomach. Despite the mild temperature, a shiver passes through her.

She can't pinpoint it, the feeling. It seems to be everywhere yet nowhere at the same time. It's not bad, necessarily just ... weird. Out of sorts, you could say. Maybe she's having a stroke. Or perhaps it's late-onset epilepsy. That would explain the blurry vision, at least.

"Should I call a nurse?" the guy says, peering into her face.

She just looks at him. It's as if her field of vision narrows; she becomes hyper-aware of the length of his lashes, the jut of his chin. When he softly touches her elbow to guide her to a seat, electricity shoots through her arm.

"I'm ... sorry, just not feeling right ... I've gotta go ..." Leda says, her cheeks flushed red, and she bolts for the stairs. It takes the strength of a thousand wild horses for her to fight the urge to look back.

She rushes through the foyer, her eyes nailed to the beckoning sunlight spilling through the door.

"Goodbye, Miss Keen," says the crimson-lipped receptionist sweetly as Leda hurries out into daylight.

Sabien's eyes scan the rows and rows of bottled fruit preserves: Apricot, orange, blueberry, lemon.

"Would you like to try some orange? I bottled it myself," says the woman with the round arms behind the counter. He accepts the biscuit with a generous dollop of preserve, then pops the whole thing in his mouth. Sabien closes his eyes to notice the notes that bounce around on his palette: Sweet. Tart. A slight zestiness. The woman beams with pride. It's not every day she meets someone as passionate about fruit preserves as she is. Most people don't even know their compote from their marmalade.

"Delicious," he gushes at her through bits of biscuit, but she hardly minds. She leans forward on the glass counter and says almost in a whisper: "If you think that's good ... you should try the fig."

He too leans closer and drops his tone, "why, do you have any?"

She purses her lips, and her cheeks light up. "I think I can arrange something ..." she chortles and click-clacks back into the kitchen on her hard-working heels.

There's a commotion at the door.

"No, no. I'm sorry, sir," a voice says firmly at the door, "I can't let you in like this."

"I just want to talk, say hello! Hello!"

“Oh yes? And this rock in your hand? You want to pay for scones with it?” chuckles the clerk playing doorman.

Sabien spins his chair around to eye the ruckus. He leans back as if watching a show and props his elbows on the counter behind him.

“That’s my property, *mine*,” says the reedy voice, and the man grabs at the rock the clerk had confiscated. “Give it back. It’s my freedom of movement. I know my rights, *domkop*.” Old Aerosol tries burrowing through the young man to gain entry into the shop. But the clerk holds him at bay like he’s warding off a man made only of bones.

“A friendly word is all, all is all. I’ll tell your aura if you’ll just lemme’.”

The saleswoman returns from the back with a plate full of biscuits and puts it down in front of her patron.

"Poor thing," she says, gesturing at Aerosol, "he’s not well."

From the door: “Just a word, my sire! Just a flex of the larynx, a vibration of the vocal chords, a word!” This time he’s talking past the bemused clerk, straight at Sabien.

“He seems to think he knows you?”

Sabien turns his back on the noise and lifts a biscuit to his mouth. He shrugs.

“Oh, he tries to kill me once or twice a year,” then back to the biscuits, “Oh my God, this *is* good!”

Her smile is uncertain and only in the corner of her mouth. She waits in vain for any sort of clarification.

“No, seriously,” he says with a grin coated in crumbs, “this is divine plus!”

Over his shoulder, two men in good suits appear out of nowhere and drag the old man from the doorway.

He's just placing the little napkin on the plate when Alexi appears next to him.

“A call,” says the tall man and hands Sabien a phone.

The woman on the other side of the line starts talking.

“Are you sure?” Sabien says quietly.

“Almost certain. I’ll check it out tonight,” says the voice.

Sabien comes to his feet, all the fruit in the world forgotten. He can hardly believe his luck. Goddammit, he loves serendipity.

# CHAPTER 12

## In the absence of tapestries

It's not well understood by those who traverse the Strata that it *wants* you to stay within it. It wants to keep you like the ocean wants to keep treasure, like a liar wants to keep a secret. It tests you, your commitment, your loyalty. But once you push past the threshold and allow your breath to run out, you become one with it.

It's not death *per se*. It simply inhales you. Making you part of it. Part of the working of the universe, forever falling towards some unspecified singularity. Myra knows it. Will doesn't know it yet.

Something changed. Ever since Leda came back from visiting her father the other night, she's been ... different. Distant. It's as if the attraction she had felt had simply atrophied overnight. Where before her eyes locked firmly in his, they now find a spot just beyond him.

Perhaps worse is that she's trying. But it's pantomime, her touch, her smiles, her words have become a routine. Harlequin has lost his Columbine.

He's not great at talking about these things. He's never had to be. He's never had anything to lose. All he knows is perpetual motion. Keep going. So, he takes the Strata to the Hillbrow Tower. The frenetic rhythm of the city is tangible there. It vibrates through the concrete-encased streets right into the Strata.

The pinkish magenta glow of pain is inside his chest, there for the taking. He can simply rip it from his body. It's not that he hasn't before. But he doesn't. He sits with it instead. Allows himself to feel the pain because the emptiness is too awful to imagine. Besides, he's no stranger to the pain. He understands that things too perfectly aligned are destined to collide.

He scales the 90 storeys and surfaces inside the 360-degree viewing room at the top of the tower. The magnificent applique tapestries depicting birdlife that once adorned the walls are long gone. In their place, sheets of peeling paint and plumes of yellowing water damage.



He usually likes spending time here, imagining the restaurant with its Louis XIV décor, families dressed in their best dining outfits. But today, it feels restrictive, claustrophobic, so he travels up onto the rounded roof instead.

He'd read somewhere that the tower sways up to a meter on a windy day. He closes his eyes and imagines the movement. Then, teetering on the very edge, he gives free rein to Poe's imp of the perverse, allowing himself the instinctual fear of falling as he drops into the wind load that rushes up and over the building. He falls quietly, controlled, taking note of the air rushing past his face, the resistance of his body, the whistle of the wind. 180 meters, 100, 80, 70, 60 then *zoop*, into the Strata, cushioned by the aberrant dynamics of the place.

Coiling reality around his finger, he travels back up, up, up until he reaches the observation deck once more and floats there like an unmoored ship.

He stays under longer than he ever has. His muscles relax through the impending darkness, through the tightness in his chest. And just before the darkness takes him, he realises he's no longer *inside* the Strata but *part* of it.

He feels the sensation of dissolving into a million particles. He feels like the star-stuff everything is made of: the tinge of orange in a sunset, the promise of untapped potential. And his consciousness is in everything, and everything is his consciousness. It's the deep calling the deep, and he answers.

Leda hasn't seen Will for days. She's been avoiding him. Just until she can understand what's happening to her. It's as if he's become a faint dream she knows she's about to forget. And she holds onto the remnants, grasps at it, but she knows it will soon be gone. What would she say? What could she say? At first, she tried just going through the motions, but she knew *he* knew none of it was real. It was in the way he watched her when he thought she wasn't looking. It was in the way his fingers searched for more than her skin, for answers perhaps. And at times, she wished he would get angry and lash out. But he didn't. So, she stayed away for a while. But she knows they have to talk. She's picked up the phone a hundred times, but she never dials.

She refuses to name what had happened at *The Somnia* the other day. She wouldn't believe it because that kind of thing doesn't happen. Yet everything she sees morphs into an elegant face punctuated with a dimple in the chin.

Eventually, she goes looking for Will, first in the real world and then in the Strata. What she'll say she doesn't know but that she has to say *something* is undeniable. She weaves her way through people, cars; she folds space to leap from place to place. Here and there, she surfaces for air but only for a second. To those who see her, she's just a flicker of the imagination, a trick of the light. They pause for a moment before going about their lives.

She visits his usual haunts, searches Maboneng, his favourite bars, even the Cradle of Humankind, where humanity's umbilical cord lies buried. Then she makes her way to the Hillbrow Tower.

Scaling the tower, she sees Will adrift up ahead. He just hangs there in mid-air, hair flowing about his face, his body slowly twisting as if caught in a current.

She rushes towards him, her hands reaching to rouse him from his daze. But he feels intangible to the touch, barely real. And the same memetic knowing that warns of the dangers of heights and snakes kicks in. She understands what's happening. She's losing him. Struggling to get a grip on his incorporeal form, she shakes him violently. But his body continues to rock gently, his hair winding about his face.

Desperate, panicked, Leda grabs him by the shoulders and drags him down to the ground, laying his head on her lap. It takes a moment, but his body loses its buoyancy and settles heavily on the floor. He opens his eyes, starts to flail in clear distress. Together they drop down onto the observation room floor, and when they surface, she's holding him in her arms. Will takes a deep breath. His face grows calm. He closes his eyes, and then he sleeps. Far below them, the miasmas of people change and flicker, die and reignite. Just people going about their lives, oblivious to the drama overhead.

# CHAPTER 13

## The dreamers

Lying flat on her back in the middle of her ratty living room, Leda concentrates on her breathing. Beneath her, the carpet smells like the inside of a vacuum cleaner. The smell competes with that of the sage burning in a saucer.

Lying down on the floor helps in a small way. It anchors her when the bottom of the world drops out for no reason. From here, the world is just shapes - long tubular things, thick bulky things, soft-looking things.

She scratches at the phantom itch on her palm.

With something between a sigh and an exhale, she turns on her side. She's dressed in jeans and a tee, but underneath, a pipestem corset is biting into her side.

From here, she can see Will asleep on the couch. She notices again how pale he is, his skin tinged blue, his veins thick and visible under his skin.

She, on the other hand, is restless. When sleep eventually comes, it is fraught with nightmares. She wakes just after midnight, sweating and struggling to shake the dreams from her head.

She thinks of Jeremy and the other patients. *But the dreams, who knows what they dream ...?* the doctor had said. Maybe right now, at this moment, her father is caught in some demonic dreamscape that plays out day after day after day after day, a nightmare from which there is no waking up reeling out? in your head. And it occurs to her, she could know. *She could know.* And she could do something about it.

The thought is not entirely new to her. It has been hovering in her periphery ever since she'd come to realise what miasmas are ... And although she so desperately wants to believe that Jeremy's mind has constructed a world where fun is on tap and consequences irrelevant, there is reason to think that not to be the case.

Slipping out of bed, she pulls the blanket over Will's sleeping form. She watches his rhythmic breathing for a moment, then pulls on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt and takes a drive to *The Somnia*.

Will had been aware of Leda leaving minutes or hours ago. He couldn't be sure as it had seemed like part of a dream. Her fingers had wriggled their way around his waist and then, just her lingering warmth on the pillow beside him. He'd been so tired, the fatigue pulling him back under and into darkness.

This time it's the *wrongness* of the sound that wakes him, a sound out of place. It's accompanied by an overwhelming sense that all is not well.

The sound of someone trying to be stealthy ebbs against him in the darkness. A drawer being opened. A door creaking. A dim shadow from the adjoining room disturbs the light reflecting blue from the fluorescent sign shining through the window. Outside all is quiet in that way that cities never really are. Car horns blare their dissatisfaction in the distance. Voices filled with liquid bravado leak out into the night.

Where he lies, Will quietly dissolves into the Strata. And it's just in time, for the figure shuffles into the room, a cartoon-burglar made from hunching shadows and malice.

Calmly, detached, Will circles the figure from inside the Strata. Here lights and darks sharpen into a heightened chiaroscuro, a Caravaggio painting of an unremarkable bedroom and an uninvited visitor.

Of course, this can be a run-of-the-mill thief. Just your grassroots, garden variety meth head looking for petty cash. But Will knows better. This is *them*. Curiously he's not fearful. No, what he feels is relief.

The intruder busies himself at Leda's drawers. Satisfied that no one is around, the figure's efforts to be quiet have fallen by the wayside.

He's tired of running. It's all he's ever known. Run. Keep your back to the wall. Travel light. Don't look back.

He doesn't know much about his persecutors. Except for the little his father told him. And except for that one bloody lesson *they* taught him one afternoon when late rains hung heavy outside the tenement in which his family had hunkered down. Oh, he knows that they hunt and use people like him, like Leda. His father had told him that much. But then what? Experiments? Torture? An image of a body on a stainless-steel table, the skin peeled back, and the insides exposed crosses his mind. It's an old vision, one that's haunted him his whole life. Except, this time, the body on the table is not his but Leda's.

Will pans right around the intruder, halfway inside the gossamer wall, to peer into the person's face. His heart leaps against his rib cage. His miasma goes bright purple. The memories slice into his mind like shards of glass. Rendering him motionless.

He'd read somewhere that we don't remember the actual event when we remember, only the latest memory of the event. A memory is only a memory of the memory before. A game of bush telephone. Copies of copies, each new iteration imbued with new artefacts. So, he knows that the blood he remembers gushing down his mother's forehead is not necessarily accurate. The blood may well have been less. It may well have been more. It might even have been the red from her dress that reminded him of blood, and that's all.

However, he remembers *this* face. *Her* face. Cathy. In fact, her face was the centrifugal force that had spun his life out of control. Even if it's a memory of a memory, it's one he's had so often that it's seared into his brain.

She's older - it's been thirteen years after all – but the lines across her face seem like scratch marks hastily superimposed over his memory of her that day. The day the men with the guns came. Her indifferent face watching as his parents scream out for him to run. He, only 12 then, on his knees, screaming for the men to stop. His father, grabbing the gun, swiftly shooting his mother then himself to give the boy a chance to run.

The woman, Cathy, takes out a cell phone. Standing in the middle of the room, she stabs at the glowing numbers with her stocky fingers. He hates everything about her. The way she moves, the way she looks. The way her thin lips pull into a wicked slit. The deceptive way her swollen feet, buried in Crocs, create a sense of harmless fragility.

This is his chance, this is his moment. All he has to do is draw her into the Strata and leave her to choke on her own wickedness. But he hesitates. Listens to what she has to say. The conversation is clipped, professional. But it confirms all his fears.

"It's me."

Silence. Then, "There's no doubt ..." a shallow laugh, "I'm looking at a photo of the two of them right now". Silence. "Yup, two in hand, right? ... I'm sure it's him. Yes. The boy from Escombe, fucking little rat. How they found each other, I can't imagine .... Yes ... I guess this changes things?" Will doesn't wait. He must find Leda.

# CHAPTER 14

## Exsanguination

The streets are quiet, so the drive is quick. But Leda arrives at gates that are securely chained up for the night. None of the security personnel come to greet her the way they usually do. Even the building wrapped in chill blue shadows seems to be giving her the cold shoulder.

She leaves her car idling and goes over to the security booth. A guard she doesn't recognise pops up at the window as she approaches.

"Uh, hi," she says, "I'm Leda Keen. I have to see my dad."

His face remains impassive.

"I know it's late, but I really must ... see my dad," she says.

"No entry after eight," the guard barks.

"You don't understand," she says, "I'm a regular visitor. They know me here. If you could just call --."

"No visitors after eight," he barks. This is not the shiny-buttoned welcoming committee she's used to. Instead, his eyes are humourless, unwavering. His hand drifts purposefully towards the gun at his belt. She shrinks away from the window. There's no doubt she's not getting in tonight. At least not this way.

"Fine!" She makes a big show of storming off only to drive around the corner where she parks at the curb. Then, behind a Kiss-me-quick bush, she slips into the Strata and walks through the decorative outer wall, through the palisades with pointed spikes, through the electric pulse fencing and into the building. For the first time, she wonders why a clinic would warrant such extreme security measures.

Still *inside*, she moves through the great hall towards the ward. Even with the soft pops and murmurs from the Strata, the place seems exceptionally quiet. No nurses at the nurses' station, nor in the kitchen or in the recreation room. The lounge is equally deserted.

It's not only the absence of staff that makes Leda feel uneasy. There is something else that activates the goosebumps in her neck. Without the luxurious fabrics and the warmth of polished wood, the lounge seems cavernous, a gaping maw. The chandelier, beautiful in

daylight, is perched on the ceiling like some demon child, its hundred eyes glinting wickedly in the low light.

She ascends the stairs, now feeling less like a princess and more like a ghost. As she approaches the ward, she can see the patients' miasmas rising from their bodies like smoke from funeral pyres. The miasmas are grey, lacklustre, barely there.

Except for one.

This one is as luminous as a raging fire. And it doesn't belong to a patient.

Running out of breath, Leda briefly emerges into the real world, outside the ward, then submerges again. She appears only for a moment, but it's enough to be captured on the security camera blinking in the corner.

At that moment, in the tiny security room in the basement of the building, a guard stares at the screens in front of him with the interest one reserves for watching paint dry. Something unusual catches his eye – it's the feed from the hallway. And there on the screen, grainy and in monochrome, a woman. One frame, nothing ... but in the next, there she is! Then gone again! He has a healthy respect for the dead. Ancestors aren't to be taken lightly. Slowly he gets up, walks to the tiny kitchenette and empties his hip flask into the basin without blinking an eye.

From inside the Strata, Leda watches the action unfold in the ward. The tenth, raging miasma, is encased in blue outlines that curve into the shape of the large woman Leda had encountered in the foyer. It's *her*. There's no doubt about that.

With the same daunting presence, the woman walks from bed to bed and injects something into each patient's IV line. As she does so, their mild miasmas flare up into leaping green flames. Under the sheets, their bodies start writhing and buckling. Leda doesn't need to be told that they're in the grip of panic or fear. Some howl, some whimper, some moan; it's a chorus from the bowels of Tartarus.

The woman reaches Jeremy's bed. Leda watches frozen. She wants to leap forward, scream out. But she can't move, can't breathe. The terror blocks the nerve impulses from her spine like some evolutionary epidural, barring her legs from making their move.

The liquid from the vial seeps into Jeremy's body, and almost instantly, his thin blue outline twists and turns in a fit.

The thin veil of time dissolves, and she's a girl again watching her father trying to kick a nasty opioid habit. She relives the horror and pain, the helplessness, of a young child watching someone they love fight a foe they themselves had conjured.

The fat woman starts shedding her clothes, and they fall where she stands like old skin, her transformation into Mesopotamian deity complete.

She removes a thigh-high leg prosthesis and carefully places it against the wall in a coordinated, practised movement.

Slowly, deliberately, palms pressed to the wall, she makes her way to the closest bed. Then she submerges into the Strata.

Leda scrambles. All the woman has to do to see her is look up ..! She tries calming her emotions; a big flare-up of whirling miasma will undoubtedly catch her attention. But the woman turns around and moves to the nearest patient's bed. Her movement is smooth inside the Strata, barely impeded by her missing limb. Instead, she moves with a discomfiting grace, allowing the Strata's physics to aid her propulsion.

Like an angel of Death, she bends over the first bed. Her hands dig deep into the patient's convulsing chest. She grabs hold of the raging green miasma, gathers it in her hands then exits the blue world where the twisting, living mist shrivels into crystalline dust. She carefully collects it in a container.

Leda watches it play out. In a sense, it's like watching a rite, something sacred and impossible. But she knows this is far more profane. *This* is a harvesting.

Then the woman is back at Jeremy's bed.

"No!"

Leda leaps from the Strata into the ward, her hands aloft, her eyes wild. A few steps have her careening into the big woman, knocking her from her feet and against the wall. The woman hisses like a snake.

Leda jumps back, her hands raised in a clumsy defensive stance.

But the figure against the wall is unmoving for a moment, two, three. Then the big round shoulders turn towards Leda, her movement slow and deliberate. It's only when she raises her heavily hooded eyes to meet Leda's that a startling white smile spreads across her face.

*Run.*



Leda doesn't have to look back to know that the woman is in hot pursuit, a colossal freight train of malice hurtling towards her. At least she'd gotten better at manoeuvring on the *inside*. You've got to run like you're a stone skipping a pond as the impact of each step is reversed, its horizontal velocity reduced, allowing your feet to only skim the ground. But the large woman is more skilled at navigating the vacillating physics inside this world, missing leg and all, and she's gaining ground quickly.

Leda's mad dash takes her through the outer wall of the building, the fact that they're on the second floor, an unimportant detail. She runs through the fence, down the road, the tangle of Jacaranda branches are ghostly white webs above her.

*Headlights!* Like a phantom from a dream, a car comes drifting down the road. It's not a night shift worker or a salesman getting an early start. It's not the newspaper delivery van or the garbage man. She recognises the car instantly. Will.

Half running, half falling, she erupts from the Strata. The thrust sends her sprawling on the blacktop. The tar tears the skin from her knees, her cheek. *No!* She tries to yell. *Stop! Turn around! Go!* But her screams are shredded to pieces by her fall.

The car shrieks to a standstill, the door flies open. And Will is in the road speeding towards her.

Leda struggles to her tattered knees with Will a few feet from her. She looks up at him through strands of blood-soaked hair and croaks: "Go!"

But he reaches out to her -

What happens next happens in slow motion. The air stirs just a little, like a heatwave, or maybe she imagines it, but a moment after that, the fat woman appears behind Will's bent figure.

Leda stares.

"Leda ..." Will starts, but there's a flash of green glass in the woman's hand and then a thin red line across Will's throat. He's on his knees. His face is more startled than horrified. His hands go to his throat.

Still on her knees, Leda reaches him just as his legs give in, and he crashes to the ground. The blood pools around her quicker than seems possible. Strands of his blood-soaked hair cling to his face, leaving lashes of red across his cheeks and forehead.

*Exsanguination*, the word, pops into her head. *Exsanguination*. It means massive blood loss.

She knows this because she watches far too much TV. The pool of blood is surprisingly viscous as it reflects the overhead streetlights and her pale face back at her.

The night is quiet. The occasional car sweeps by, hushed, like latecomers to the pew. It's a silence that's quieter than other silences. A stillness that blocks out the night sounds of the city but amplifies the thud of your own heart.

In the cold moments before sunrise, Leda's eyes find the fat woman. She's perched on the hood of Will's car, forcing its nose towards the ground. The most unlikely hood ornament. Her hand is red with blood, cut with the green shard of glass she'd used to kill Will. She pays it no attention.

To Leda, she is the only thing that exists now. The only thing that matters. An item that must be ended.

Leda gets to her feet, her legs wet with blood. Her head lowered; her fists balled. The murderer gives her an impersonal smile like someone looking up from a marginally interesting magazine in a waiting room.

"Are you coming around then?" the woman smarms. Her voice is deep and rich, earthy in a way.

"Why?" Leda's voice is low.

"To get your attention. It's petty, I know. The boss is gonna be pissed, but what can you do?"

A primal snarl peels from Leda's lips, and she charges at the woman still seated on the car. Just before impact, the woman slips into the Strata, and Leda crashes into the hood.

"That a girl," the woman says as she emerges from the Strata a few steps away, "let the anger burn. Fire cleanses." Then: "We've been watching you. We know who you are. What you want."

Leda spins around and charges at the figure once more.

This time the woman's disappearance sends her sprawling.

"Yessss," the woman hisses, clearly enjoying the game, "you'll thank me one day, you know ...."

Leda is on her feet, and she charges.

"Feelings are weakness," the woman says, waiting until Leda's vicious fingers draw blood before she disappears. Leda gives an ugly howl of frustration before blindly charging at the voice again. "... it's just fodder."

This time Leda dives after her, and they both disappear into the Strata.

Their struggle weaves them in and out of the blue world like a needle threading a tapestry, in the one side, out the other.

“Come on, girl, you know better ... our world is one of no limits. You can have everything, anything, anyone ... what about that boy at the clinic, hey?”

“I don’t understand!”

The woman’s chunky arm locks around Leda’s neck. It feels cold and clammy and immovable. “Oh, you understand ...” the woman whispers, her breath on Leda’s ear, “it’s just a matter of embracing the fact that we’re gods.”

She pulls Leda back into the Strata, but the arm, like a vice grip, remains around her neck. *She’s trying to keep me here! Inside!* Leda’s panic sucks the oxygen from the air, bringing on that breathless feeling even faster. All the time, the woman is watching her face closely, their noses almost touching, her eyes peering deep into Leda’s as she waits for that light to go out.

Instead of the darkness, the Strata’s blinding white closes in on Leda. The blue lines of things become fainter. She stops kicking. The white erasing everything like on a white page. She’s floating. Her body is limp, and she sways like a poppy in Myra’s forgotten garden.

*This is how I die.* She doesn't feel fear, only the pain.

“Are you ready to listen?” the woman says, “I have answers if you’re ready to hear them?”

Leda had wanted to hear those words so desperately. All her life, she's yearned for someone to show her the way. And never more so than now. All she has to do is succumb, and things will finally make sense.

She lifts her eyes to look into the woman’s face, searches its cobalt contours for a hint of the promised knowledge. But she knows all she’ll learn here is darkness.

Reaching deep into her own chest, she grabs hold of her pain, it feels like a million tiny glass fibres cutting into her flesh, and with all her strength, she thrusts it into the woman’s chest. Instantly the mild simmering miasma inside of the woman catches fire, and her body lights up in the luminous red glow of Leda’s pain. Clawing at her chest, the pain unbearable, she staggers from the Strata and into the world with Leda short on her heels. Leda’s fingers find the car keys that had fallen from Will’s hand; she drives them at the

woman's face and plunges them through the orbital roof of her eye where small spicules of skull bone lacerate the brain cortex.

# CHAPTER 15

## Unlikely snowstorms

Dawn is still some way off, but early morning traffic is starting up. Leda doesn't try to find Will's pulse or listen for breath. She'd seen him from inside the Strata, devoid of miasma, a dead thing. Like a doll or a toaster.

A car stops at the scene. And another. It's a matter of moments before the screaming and yelling starts, Leda has no doubt about that. And indeed, a scream from one of the onlookers pierces the air, letting havoc loose. Now the morning is filled with sounds and colours and movement.

Leda ducks into the Strata and slices through it faster than ever before. Her rage is hardly satisfied. She wants to lash out. Inflict pain. She's on autopilot. There is no semblance of a plan. Just potential targets. *We've been watching you*, the woman had said. She's a heat-seeking missile. *We've been watching you. Well, try watching me with one eye, bitch. And dead.*

*Blood. Keys. Blood and keys, Leda's mind goes. An eye pierced. Ruptured globe. Will dead. Will. We've been watching you.*

*We've been watching you... Larry!*

One turn and Leda runs right into a gathering group of protesters. She doesn't deviate, plunges right through the milling crowd. Their rally cries and staccato chants become traction as she runs.

At this time of the morning, the group is already sizeable, their anger palpable. Here and there, a fire is devouring an innocent dumpster. The sound of a window breaking. Like at Maboneng, when she encountered the group of tourists, no one miasma can be defined; it's just one nebulous, cloying fog of scarlet, purple and black, interlaced with pure bright blues of excitement. But this time, Leda thrives on it, she imbibes the rage, inhales it. It ignites her own rage to monstrous heights until that is all she is.

Carrying the fury with her, she exits the horde and cuts through Murray Park, then folds most of the space between her and the apartment block.

She sees him from a distance, his white silhouette doing barbell curves on the edge of his bed. His miasma is a languid orange.

Like a hurricane made of wrath, blood and bone, she bursts from the Strata in front of him. Her frenzy trumps her modesty or her fear. Even before his brain truly registers that she's just appeared out of thin air, his body reacts and sends him reeling, falling flat on his back.

Without breaking stride, Leda negotiates the space between them, and in this one movement, seizes a pair of scissors from the counter.

"You! You've been watching me? *Spying* on me!"

He looks up at her petrified, spittle has formed tiny bubbles on his lower lip.

"Answer me!"

"I-i-i-i'm sorry! I'm sorry!" he stutters, his Adam's Apple bouncing around in his throat.

It would be so easy, so satisfying, so *gratifying*, to plunge the scissors into his throat ... Like a Neanderthal on the plains of Patagonia, bow-legged, ball fisted, draped in skin and blood and righteous anger she'd thrust the scissors into the traitor, a mix between a cry and a yell escaping her lips.

What he says next brings her crashing to the ground.

"It's just that ... I love you!" The whites of his eyes are bright, the pale lashes rim the red around the sclera.

"What?" she says.

Through quivering chapped lips, he says again: "I said ... I love you."

He raises himself onto his elbows, but a threatening gesture from her drives him back into the prone position.

It's then that Leda catches a glimpse of herself in the mirror, manic, fanged in her rage, her eyes those of a wild thing. This time *she* staggers backwards.

Recognising the change in her demeanour, Larry raises himself onto his elbows again.

"I don't know what's up with you. I know you've got ... stuff going on ... but I love you."

"The pictures ..." she mewls softly.

He looks ashamed, "I'm sorry."

She doesn't say anything further, just recedes into the Strata. The echo of the scissors hitting the floor follows her into the blue.

Moments later, she emerges in her own flat. She stands around for a few moments, impotent, helpless. Completely shut down as the images of what transpired loop in her head. She's got to get it together. Focus.

Putting her hands to her temples, Leda breathes in the storm and becomes a wind-still day. And because her life has been one long lesson on knowing when to exit, she rinses the blood from her body, grabs the box containing her ephemera, a pair of pants and gets the hell out of there.

But just as she exits, Larry appears in her doorway.

"Wait," he says, "take this." He presses a set of keys in her hand. The gesture breaks her, and she presses her cheek against his chest. The hug is brief, and she awkwardly disengages before taking the stairs with Larry's car keys in hand.

Larry's car is hardly a prize, a real clunker from the 70s when industrial designers were inspired by rockets and outer space. Inside it's a shithole. Empty protein bar wrappers, fitness flyers and plastic bottles tumble over one another and under the seats.

There's a snow globe stuck to the linoleum dashboard. Inside the glass dome, a small effigy of Table Mountain awaits a snowstorm. She plucks it from the dashboard and gives it a shake. She hears Will's voice: *A snowstorm on Table Mountain? Highly unlikely. A flurry at the most.*

She embeds the globe in the putty blob on the dashboard and focuses on the task at hand. And as she pulls away from the curb, the movement of the car unleashes an unlikely snowstorm around the tiny Table Mountain.

# CHAPTER 16

## The final boy

The balloon glass shatters against the wall. A hail of curses falls among the shards. Ian takes a deep breath then turns to the boy again.

“Can you believe it?” he hisses. The boy doesn’t respond.

“Without that goddamn leviathan, I’m fuckin’ dead! Dead! We’re down to *five!*”

With a sickening crunch, his hand smashes into the wall, leaving it broken and bloody. The pain centres him. Brings him back to a place where he can think. He takes a deep breath and turns to the boy, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry ... you must think me a monster. I just ... lost it there for a moment.”

Alexi steps forward and binds a handkerchief around his boss’s hand. He knows the man well enough not to speak.

Although he is composed again, his white shirt with blood on its cuff perfectly straightened, the blood remains drained from Ian Sabien’s face.

“Do we know what happened?”

Alexi shakes his head, "It's all very unusual ...."

“No one saw anything?”

"We're still speaking to people, and ..." he hesitates.

“What?”

"There's something ...."

“Speak,” his voice is a growl.

“It’s the girl, Leda ... clinic security says she was there earlier.”

“You’re not saying ...?”

Alexi clears his throat. “Um, there’s something else ... The boy, uh, man, you know, the one we just found? Uh, ... he’s dead too.”

This time the man’s anger does not spill to the surface. The only indication that it’s even there is that his pale eyes have grown paler. The lanky aide gives a step back



involuntarily. Even from where he's standing, he can feel the rage, heavy, cloying, suffocating. As if all the air had suddenly left the room.

Sabien sighs and turns back to the boy. Then, over his shoulder, he says to Alexi, "Well, I want her found. *You* personally. Do you understand?"

"Yes".

"No ... I said ... do – you – understand?"

And Alexi understands all too well that his life depends on finding the girl, code name: Michael Faraday.

"Yes. I *understand*, sir."

The man bends down to the boy's eye level. But he addresses Alexi one more time.

"Good. Oh, Alexi ... please close the door on your way out."

A few moments, then a soft click.

"Well," he says to the boy matter-of-factly, "this leaves you, right?"

Still, the boy does not speak. He's stopped struggling against the ropes a while ago.

"You understand why it's so important for you to show me you can travel, right?"

Show me!"

The boy's eyes are vacant. He's not there anymore. But wherever he's gone in his mind, it is not the Strata.

# CHAPTER 17

## Between Kuruman and Kathu

Leda drives towards the outskirts of town without any idea of where she's going. Her mind clicks over as she scans her mental rolodex for places and people.

One recurring picture keeps popping up, a pack of wild dogs standing on a rock, looking out across the plains. The stamp on the back reading: *Oorvloed*.

The postcard had been old. There was a real chance that the sender was no longer there, or dead. But the thought of those open spaces and her mind is made up. She's going to look for her uncle in the Karoo.

Her first stop is a petrol station with a small shop. She searches the racks lined with sweets and essential commodities in travel sizes, looking for a map.

She's a little rusty at shoplifting. It was a game she'd played with Jeremy as a child. And she was damn good at it. Although she sometimes got the impression he let her win. God, she hasn't done this in years. But surely it's like riding a bike?

First, assess the situation. One clerk in the front looking bored. Watching TV. Eating Snickers. Threat assessment, low. However, the other, an older man with thick black hair, leans heavily on the counter, working through some numbers in front of him. An amateur would think him engrossed in the paperwork but pay a little attention, and you'll see those alert little eyes scanning the security camera.

Two: choose your strategy.

Strategy one, "Distraction".

For this one, you need a large group, overwhelm staff with questions and requests by being boisterous. Not an option.

Approach two: The good old "Packaging switch".

Slip more expensive stuff inside the packaging of cheaper items. Simple. Almost infallible. However, she has no money whatsoever, so that one's out. Same with approaches three and four: "Price tag switch" and the "Honest mistake". But no money, so no go.

That leaves approaches five and six: “Speed” and “Concealment”. She expertly combines the two and exits the store with a departing smile and a map of South Africa under her jacket.

Inside the car, she unfolds the map, wrestles with its unwieldiness. Eventually, she finds the town on the map. *Oorvloed*. It’s a smudge of a thing, easy to overlook.

Well, Leda thinks as she bundles up the map, I’ve never been to the Northern Cape. As she’s leaving the petrol station, the cashier watches her from the shop’s doorway. She just smiles and waves through the dust-caked window.

She drives. The city gives way to the suburbs, and the suburbs give way to farmlands. Civilisation becomes a mere blip on the radar. There is virtually no other traffic on the road, apart from the occasional long haulier or bakkie. Leda gives herself over to hypnoses caused by the eternal blacktop.

The N12 becomes the N14 and stays that for the next 1003 km. It’s a straight stretch of road, but her mind keeps winding. She switches on the radio. Burying her head in golden oldies and phone-in debates where ill-informed opinions are delivered with the zealousness of the converted frees her from the responsibility to think.

It gets drier the further north she goes, more arid, the vegetation sparser. The landscape colours are organised in layers like a strange *ombré* dappled by the occasional baobab and half-mensch.

The drive is long and arduous, too long to escape one’s own head. Even the zealots on the radio can’t distract her any longer. So, it’s about halfway between Kuruman and Kathu that Leda cracks and the confines of the car, and the confines of her head, catch up with her. With the anger gone and the numbness of the ride dispelled, the tears come. And when they do, they come in giant gulps.

Raw, ravaging, they rip through her body. She slams her fist down on the steering wheel, making the car skid to a halt on the gravel next to the road, narrowly missing a road sign warning motorists of roving ostriches.

The car stalls, and Leda slumps in her seat, the horror of that morning grips her heart and squeezes. The pain is unbearable.

She doesn’t think about what she’s about to do, doesn’t consider the consequences, just slips into the Strata and starts tearing the heartbreak from her chest. Every shred of

sadness, every trace of shame and everything in between get yanked out. She leaves nothing. She doesn't stop until all she feels is emptiness. And the void feels good, cold, clinical, burning clean like alcohol poured into a wound. The red dust of the Karoo takes its time to settle around her.

With space to grow in the empty cavity that is her chest, she starts noticing the beauty of the arid landscape flitting past. The quiver trees, gnarled baobab, the flat-topped dolerite sills in the distance and here and there, the gravity-defying weavers' nests precariously perched on telephone poles.

By the time the town rises from behind some rock formations, the horizon offers her a sunset so beautiful, it takes her breath away. But the moment is marred by the smell of sulphur that spools into the car from the spoil tips hulking against the pink and orange skyline.

*Oorvloed* is a place that removes all doubt: Yes, God hates you. It's a small enclave, a hangover from a failed uranium mining expedition that tore open the belly of the Karoo, leaving it bare and exposed. Those who could, left. Those who couldn't go stayed behind and watched their dreams and savings fade in the sun.

The town itself looks like a land of Lego slapped together by a thoughtless child who had incorporated balls of yarn, matchboxes and the torso of a Barbie in its municipal design. The commerce area consists of a single street boasting one traffic light at the pedestrian crossing in front of the local superette. The town hall is a stately Union-style building. Its sensible turrets and stone colonnades stand proudly at attention while a dusty-windowed pawnshop and small loans traders squat shamelessly at its elbows.

The town is quiet. There is not a soul in sight. The shop with a sign saying something in Chinese is closed with a giant lock, the steel shutters pulled down. So is the superette and even the liquor store.

Like a moth to a flame, she follows the only living light. It spills from one building, the sign above it says, *The Hole in the Bucket – bar and slots*. She pulls the car to the kerb, and carrying the weight of the road with her, she climbs out.

Outside, dusk has sucked the heat from the air and replaced it with a reedy cold that will just grow colder throughout the night. And even though there's no feeling to match the thought, she thinks: Just this morning I killed someone.



# CHAPTER 18

## In defence of the Urian long-nosed monkey

Rock bottom doesn't always happen at once. Most often, it happens incrementally, in minor disappointments that you never quite come back from.

You lose a contract, a bus ticket, then you lose a friend, some money. You lose your lover, your confidence, your hair, your job. Until you find yourself a middle-aged, second-rate party clown with a disdain for children and a mechanical gizmo that reminds your heart to beat.

Mel doesn't even mind this *status quo* anymore. He minds when the brandy runs out. When he has to walk two blocks to buy loose-draw from Garthy on the corner. But he no longer cares about the monumental failures that got him hulking down in solidarity with his own misery.

Besides, he doubts his career as John Wayne the Cowboy Clown has much juice left. The mummies failed to see the humour in the moniker adapted from the serial killer John Wayne Gacy, known as the 'killer clown'. *It's a joke!* He chuckles. It still makes *him* laugh. He regards every day he doesn't lose his cool and tell a ten-year-old brat to fuck off a good day. And those tight-lipped mummies with their affected interjections imported from the cities have nothing better to do than gossip over their banting brunches. Call one goddamn birthday boy a dickhead, and you'll never work in this town, or the greater godforsaken Northern Cape Province, again.

"Barkeep! Another drink!" he declares across the bar as if it's a decree.

"Goddamit, Mel. The last one, okay?"

"Fool," Mel mumbles, "don't you know declaring '*el ultimo*,' your last drink, will have Death taking you up on the offer?"

Mel considers his own words for a second, then belts, "*el ultimo!*"

Apart from clowning, he'd been thinking about Death a lot lately.

Death, to him, was just the prospect of glorious, never-ending nothingness. He's an existentialist in this way. No pain, no memories, no goddamn awful balloons that must be

twisted into animals, no teeming children with tongues stained red from party cooldrink, and fingers stained yellow from double-dipping in the cheese chip bowl.

He tips his glass and peers into the amber liquid as if it contains more money for amber liquid.

It isn't a matter of *if* anymore but about *how*.

Bullets, trains, ropes – by far the suicide method of choice for men – is not an option. Despite being an absurdly big individual with all the markers of conventional masculinity, he is seriously averse to pain. He's almost sure that he could manage poison, but *that* will entail planning and doing.

So far, his active attempts at offing himself extended only to lingering outside a Woolworths in the hope that their Anti-theft system would trip up his pacemaker. But the security lady told him to stop frotting the metal detector. So instead of shutting the fuck up and killing himself already, he hopes his liver will tap out and save him the effort. So here he is, still above snakes.

"Fuck it," he suddenly says decisively and downs the last drop in one gulp, slamming the glass down on the table. He has made his decision. He has not felt this decisive, this sure of anything for years, decades. He's going to look for a train and step in front of it. Yep. That's the plan. He knows there isn't a railway operating in these parts anymore, but he'll drive until he finds one.

With a loud screech, he pushes his chair from the bar and staggers to his feet.

"Oi Mel, your bill!" the barman calls.

"Fuck you, Lou," Mel says and gathers his keys from the counter, "sue me."

"Goddamit man, how long have you known me? You know it's Elvin."

"Whatever," Mel mutters and turns to leave but becomes aware of a presence at his elbow.

Two identical girls who keep on merging and separating, merging and separating, stand next to him.

They are slight little things, gloomy-looking, sullen.

"Stetson?" the girls say in unison.

"No one calls me that anymore," he growls and squints at them. He then adds, "no thanks," and waves them away, "not my type. I like a bit of junk in the luggage compartment."

“I’m glad,” the girls chorus, “seeing that I’m your niece.”

“Harrumph?”

“I’m Leda.”

The girls become one again and stay like that for a while.

“Fuck me,” says Mel, formerly known as Stetson, before hitting the floor like a felled tree.

Nothing should surprise Leda after everything she’s seen. Secret worlds, emotion miasmas, dead friends, lacerated eyeballs and all that. But the sight of the man she has been looking for does.

It is not that she is in the market for a saviour. On the contrary, her father has cured her of that naivety. She just needs a rock in the ocean, somewhere to perch when all around her is water. And if he *could* offer sage advice on how not to be killed by her unnamed persecutors, that would be nice.

It isn’t the sheer size of him that floors her, or even the drunken stupor ... it is the fact that he’s wearing clown makeup. *Smudged* clown makeup like a chalk-drawn Pierrot left out in the rain. This must be some cosmic joke, she thinks, standing over the fallen man. A real laugh-out-loud knee-slapper, for sure. She looks down at him.

He, it seems, has curled up into the fetus position and fallen asleep. One, sock-only, foot kicks out into the air like a dog dreaming of cars and cats.

The barman, a portly man with kind round cheeks, is smacking the grubby clown face. On the clown’s cheek, the red lipstick has mixed into the white face paint. Blue eye shadow and black, streaked lines under his eyes. Everything in his vicinity – the carpet, the stool, the barman - is smeared with traces of white.

‘Hey, asshole! Dammit, man, wake up.’

“Is he okay?” asks Leda.

“Hmph”, the barman snorts, “vermin don’t just die. He does this a lot.” The few other patrons in the bar scarcely look up from their drinks which makes Leda believe this to be true.

“Oi! Mel,” the barman says and slaps her uncle’s face hard. “You recognise this young lady?”

The big lug stirs and lifts his head and says: “Who do I need to jerk off to get a drink around here?”



“My God, man!” says the barman and, together, he and Leda help the fallen clown back onto the barstool.

When he is eventually seated, the barman holds the man’s face in his hands.

“Mel, now listen to me. Focus, buddy. Step-up time is here, okay? Okay.”

It takes the clown a moment but eventually, his eyes find Leda's. His bottom lip trembles for a moment, making him look like the most tragic clown in history. After the silence, he speaks: “Look, lady, send your complaint to the Clown federation. I take great pride in my balloon art. It was a Urian, long-nosed monkey, FYI. Not my fault those little shitheads thought it looked like a ball sack.”

He slumps forward and promptly goes back to sleep.

Mel’s is an unassuming house, a squat little bastard with two big windows for eyes and a red-polish porch that juts out like a sad little lip. Its diminutive appearance is deceptive because inside, it’s surprisingly roomy – four bedrooms, living and eating area, oversized kitchen. One bathroom, though. Symptomatic of the mining house it started its life as.

Around mid-afternoon, Mel emerges from the little toilet stall where he’d fallen asleep at one point during the night. One side of his clown makeup is completely gone as it had been transferred to the toilet stall wall.

Leda watches him over the rim of a chipped cup of coffee as he lumbers across the floor. The coffee tastes like nothing but chicory, but it’s wet, and it’s warm, so she drinks it.

She waits for him to notice her. Watching him tottering across the floor, she feels a mix of emotions: disgust, pity, even amusement, but the dominant feeling is undoubtedly disappointment. Of the slender-hipped broad-shouldered man she remembers from her childhood, there is no trace. What’s left is just a mess of a man conscientiously trying to murder his liver.

She has no preconceived notions of starting over. She’s been around the block enough to know that new beginnings are rarely *new*. Mostly they’re yesterday with a brave new haircut and a can-do attitude. But you’re just the same, ambling along the smooth ridges of past mistakes that cut so deep you can’t escape them. The best she hopes for is a place to hide.

Grumbling to himself, Mel digs around a cupboard, scratches his ass, then takes a box of cereal.

When Leda suddenly speaks up behind him, he sends a hailstorm of multicoloured Fruit Loops flying across the floor.

Leda sucks her lips into a thin line.

“Holy hell!”

Pressed up against the kitchen counter, he says, “what do you want?”

“Do you remember me? From last night?”

He tips the cereal box over a bowl, and two solitary loops come tumbling out.

“Dammit,” he groans, casting the empty box aside.

“Do you remember me?” Leda repeats forcefully this time.

He stops and looks at her.

“You look like the chick from *The Ring*.”

“You look like if a fanny itch was a person”, she retorts without missing a beat.

“Well, you look like a nip slip no one wants to see.”

“Well, you look like the human centipede on a bad hair day.”

Something like a grin unfurls on his face.

“Anna’s kid,” he says. His voice is gruff, like gravel. He resumes rummaging through the cupboard.

“Yup.”

“What do you want from me?”

Leda is quiet for a moment, then says, “the Strata, um, Stratum.”

He stops short. And slowly turns around.

When he eventually speaks, his voice is low and hoarse: “You travel?”

He looks at her as if seeing her for the first time.

She nods.

“Ghu, eish! You sure took your sweet time. We thought you didn’t have it anymore.”

His face changes again as something occurs to him. He becomes very antsy, very quickly.

“And do *they* know?”

“I believe they do,” Leda says. She squeezes her eyes shut.

Mel abandons his search for cereal and sits down at the kitchen table. Despite her sense of him as a beaten man, his frame remains formidable.

“Then it won’t be long before they come.”

*A flash of the fat woman's miasma-less body.*

"They won't. They don't know where I am."

Mel laughs sardonically. "If you think that you're even dumber than you look."

"Well, you look like the headless horseman's head had been found ...", the retort is pure reflex, but she revels in it.

Mel smiles again, "It's up his arse, isn't it? They found it up his arse?"

Leda huffs.

Her uncle's serious again. "They'll find you. They have the resources. They have the motivation. They have spies playing the long game everywhere."

"They haven't found you, Stetson."

He looks like a scolded child.

"Don't call me that," he says quietly, "I haven't been that man for years."

He averts his eyes before continuing, "They don't want me. I'm of no use to them anymore – or at least that's what they think."

He taps two fingers on his chest, "Bad heart. Pacemaker. The moment I pass through the pellicle, this baby will be torn from my body. Game over."

*It's not what you can take with you ...* She hears Jeremy's voice in her head.

"What do they want from us?" she asks.

"What *do* they want?" Mel asks in a slow, measured drawl. His face grows cold and impassive. "What do they *want*?" he repeats. Slowly he pushes up the sleeve of his shirt.

"What do they *want*?"

He moves surprisingly quickly. The next moment he's looming over Leda, his muddled face so close their noses almost touch. The move is so unexpected that Leda lets out a scream. As if in an out-of-body experience, she sees his enormous fist pulling back. The knuckles on the hams are white and hairy. The fist drives towards her so fast she can barely recoil. But instead of slamming into her chest, his hand disappears inside of it. Frozen, in shock, Leda stares at the hand lodged in her chest, the fear rendering her motionless. He rummages around inside her chest, and as suddenly as it had come, her fear is gone. Just like that. As if a light switch had been flipped. Now she just watches the spectacle of a giant forearm swallowed by a vortex in her chest.

Slowly he retrieves his hand from the Strata, within it a wild squirming vapour desperately trying to return to a host. Eventually, he fights the thing into submission, and his fingers enclose it in his palm.

He waits a moment, then lifts his hand right up to her face and slowly opens his fingers. All that was left of the miasma is a hand full of tiny green-silver crystallites.

“What ..?” Leda stammers. She lowers her face to study the pretty tiny grains.

“Woaw!” Mel snarls and retrieves his hand, “careful, this stuff gets in your pores, your nose, and you're fucked. Hooked for life. A good old cataclysmic cocktail of dopamine and serotonin. Fuck nuclear fusion. This is the atomic bomb of intoxicants”. His eyes bore into hers.

“Emotions,” he says, “are contagion.”

He turns away from her, the tension resolved.

“That’s what they want most”. He discards the stuff down the kitchen drain then washes his hand vigorously. He walks over to the couch and starts flicking through the TV channels.

“Drugs? This is about drugs?”

Mel shrugs, “What else? Drugs. Money. Power. The latest and greatest high. Other emotions work as well, but fear ... well, fear is potent as fuck.” He lies down flat on his back on the couch, most of his legs dangling off the side.

“So, I’m guessing they don’t know you can do that ... arm thing?” asks Leda. He answers with a grunt.

“So, they need us to ...” she searches for the word, “... harvest it for them?”

But Mel says nothing more. He’s done talking.

Leda sighs. She has to get out of here. Go for a walk. Just as her hand touches the front door, Mel yells from the living room:

“Well, if you're gonna hang around, you may as well start by picking up some Fruit Loops.” She pauses at the door and allows herself a little wry smile.

“Nothing with raisins,” his voice follows her out the door.

For the next while, Leda and Mel coexist like passing ships in the night. Their interactions limited to grunts and the occasional bout of snark and derision. Of the mentor she dreamed, there is little sign. Of the domestic helper he hoped for, even less.

Here in this place, every minute feels like an hour, every hour, like a lifetime. To Leda, it feels as if a clock has been rewound. As if she, like Sisyphus, is at the bottom of the hill again. It's as if her inclination to self-destruct never left. And she sinks back into that way of being as if into a warm bath. This time around, though, her compulsive desire to numb her emotions has taken on a more literal form. Who needs proxies like tight corsets, or altered chemical states, if you can reach right into your chest and tear the hurt from your body like unwanted weeds?

So, with the fervour of religious ritual, every night at around the time when the horizon flips the heat of the day into freezing cold night, she walks out into the *veld*. Here she strips off all her clothes to the gaze of rocks, tufts of browned grass and the purple Roggeveld Mountains. She stacks them neatly in a small pile and sinks into the Strata. There she rips the pain and shame and guilt from her body like cobwebs from a cupboard.

Of course, there is no nuance, no discretion in what she's doing. Because emotions are messy. They flow into each other, twisting and weaving, mixing and mingling, impossible to untangle and delineate. It's all or nothing. So, the ritual leaves Leda feeling nothing at all.

She dares not be late with the ritual. If left too late the feelings will return. The same pain, the same anger, the same shame ...

Inside the Strata, her fingers close around the tiny shoot of emotion that has already germinated in her chest, and she pulls it out by the root. She looks at it for a moment in macabre fascination. It twists itself around her fingers, her wrists. It wants to return to her emptiness the way air wants to return to a vacuum. She quickly shakes it from her hand then delves deep into her chest again to harvest the rest.

The ritual complete, she stumbles from the Strata into the desert dusk and pulls on her clothes. She hadn't brought a jacket, and the cold Karoo air chills her bones. She is exhausted, but at least her grief for Will is just a hollow ache again; her shame for leaving Jeremy to those emotion leeches, a vague discomfort. The horror that she is a murderer, gone. Chris Quin is just a pretty face she recalls as if from a movie she once saw.

The "cleansing ritual" also serves to temper her fears. If she leaves her fears to fester and grow, she will be submerging every five minutes like a big wave surfer obsessed with danger from the deep. They could be right there, others like her, maybe rummaging around her limbic system, inserting and removing feelings the way you remove "Brain Freeze" or a "Charley Horse" from the game *Operation*. So even though she submerges every now and

again to ensure someone isn't lurking *inside*, it's motivated by the reality that nothing good will come from that.

With Mel at the bar, Leda spends most of her time painting. The paintings are technically proficient and skilful, pretty really, but she'd be the first to say they lacked something. They're little more than pretty pictures suited for the walls of a chain-hotel or an executive boardroom.

When she's not transfixed by the canvas, she's wandering the desert by way of the Strata. It's so unlike the city. Everything's so blue, unbound by walls and streets and people. On the *inside*, the sun, a bright-white ball of fire, is reduced to a mild winter sun. While at night, without the intrusion of superficial light, the stars seem so close it's easy to imagine swinging from one to the other.

It's in the desert that she has profound experiences. Not the kind that brings knowledge or wisdom, only awe. When she approaches them from *inside*, the desert creatures seem aware of her, their faint miasmas changing at her approach. But they do not run or cower. A pouched mouse, rearing up, sniffs the air as if sensing rain. A Gila monster cocks its head, listening. A horned adder turns its head towards her, its tongue tasting the air. At least these encounters allow her little bursts of wonder throughout the day. Little wells of emotion that remind her that she's alive. But all of it - the thunderstorm that rages across the plains one night, the twister that fumes but doesn't touch her - they are all mere distractions. They leave her feeling detached, unanchored, still. They are little more than dabs of oil on a pool of indifference.

# CHAPTER 19

## Of things lost and things sold

Leda eyes the hat and its box critically. She knows it's old since the date printed inside the box says so, and it's in pristine condition. It should fetch a fair price from the pawnshop on Church Street.

It has become apparent that Mel's career as a party clown is over. The only things left in the cupboard are a tin of sardines and an old pack of jelly powder that outlived the border war, the end of Apartheid and grunge. Leda's stopped opening the fridge in the hope that there'll be something edible in it. And the hat is the only thing she can find in the house that seems remotely valuable.

She knows that she should ask Mel about the hat, but the hunger pangs are gnawing, and besides, he's been passed out for two days from a bee-wine brewed by one of the locals. So, it's with a bit of spiteful resolve that Leda makes her way to the pawn store, hatbox under the arm.

She's managed to avoid town for the most part, but every so now and again, she's compelled to stop by for essentials. Everything about her demeanour discourages interaction, the hoodie she wears despite the heat, her earphones, her downcast gaze. But the problem with small towns is that they are small. And as a new face, she's the only game in town.

So, with remarkable tenacity, or obtuseness, the town's people insist on engaging her in a chat whenever she passes by. So, despite her best efforts, Leda is becoming an *Oorvloeder*. They wear her down until she knows far too much about the townspeople and their doings.

It also becomes clear to Leda that she's not the only one in this town at the end of the world who is running from something. The town seems to be inhabited by a motley crew of misfits and, she surmises, fugitives. She's pretty sure that the pharmacist, a tall man with a loud laugh not suited to the sombre world of pills and enemas, is running from the law. Everything about the middle-aged couple who own the local vegetable store is far more First

Families of Virginia than farm-to-table. And a girl named Lulu, roughly Leda's age, has, rather indiscreetly, alluded to being in witness protection.

Today it is Elvin the bar owner who Leda bumps into on her way to the pawnshop. He's busy unlocking the door to the bar when he sees her and extends a friendly greeting. He continuously eyes the hatbox under her arm but does not make reference to it.

"Hat," Leda shrugs.

"Ah," he says, "how's Mel? He okay?"

"Kay," says Leda, "you know."

He nods in solidarity, but then his demeanour changes: "Oh no," he says and busies himself with the lock he can't seem to open fast enough, "don't look now, but Marcia Tanner is at it again."

Leda's head swings round: "Who?"

"Don't look! She'll come over here."

The woman in question, dressed in a floral blouse and drawstring jeans, is darting from pillar to shop window, industriously pasting yellow flyers as she goes.

Leda watches as she disappears into the home industries shop, flyers in hand.

"Poor thing," sighs Elvin, using his shoulder against the door like a battering ram, "delusional. If someone would just have the balls to tell her the kid ran away. She's always running away. In fact, I'll bet money on it. She's always been troubled, you know, that kid. When she was thirteen, she ran away. When she was fifteen, she ran away. So, most likely, she ran away this time too."

"And the woman, the mother, will have none of that?"

Elvin nods, "It was the same things the first two times, but this time the police were just like, 'Nah, she's probably out being wild with friends.'"

The door eventually concedes, and Elvin slips inside, gesturing for her to do the same. But it's too late. The woman had exited the shop and makes a bee-line for them, a flyer already extended in one hand.

"My goodness, Marcia," says Elvin as the woman approaches, "you look exhausted. You must take a break."

"I must find her, Elvin. She's out there. Alone."



"I'm telling you, *everyone* is telling you, she's fine. Tonight or tomorrow, you'll get a call from her asking you to pick her up in Upington or somewhere. You know kids. You know Celia."

The woman's eyes are bloodshot. The bags under her eyes are an unhealthy purple, the lines in her face seem new. The sun has coloured the web of thin veins around her nose a deep red.

For a moment, it looks like Elvin's words had taken the wind from her sails. Her shoulders sag just a little, her chin drops. But within moments, she regains her resolve.

"Miss, have you seen my girl, my Celia?" she says, turning her attention to Leda, already shoving a flyer into her hand. There's a picture of a girl on the flyer. She's cuddling a small furry dog. Her hair is cut in a blunt bob just below the ears. The smile on her face is bright and bucktoothed. Thin-framed glasses frame blue eyes. In big sans serif above the picture, the words: *HAVE YOU SEEN* - then below the picture - *CELIA?*

"The picture's a bit old," says Marcia, "but it's my favourite one."

Leda shakes her head and starts handing the picture back. But the woman, her voice quivering, her eyes filling with tears, ignores Leda's efforts and says, "please look again. Please."

"Your daughter?" asks Leda because what else is there to say?

The woman looks at the pack of flyers in the curve in her arm. Her gaze softens. "My oldest," the woman nods, "a real tomboy, you know?"

Leda doesn't know.

"Well, she's been missing for two days. She just didn't come home from Tess, you know the Reid girl's house. She's only 15."

Leda shakes her head solemnly. The woman looks so defeated as if Leda had been her last hope that Leda says, "but I'll keep an eye out."

"Well, keep the flyer," she says, "my number is at the bottom. If you see anything ...."

"Come, Marcia," says Elvin, "you need a drink. Get you off your feet for a while?"

The woman nods gratefully and allows herself to be led into the coolness of the bar.

Leda watches them go. Maybe she could ... *do* something, *change* something ... She *could* do something about that pain at least ... But she dismisses the thought, and the barman and the distraught mother are engulfed by the darkness of the bar.

Walking the rest of the way to the pawnshop, Leda folds the flyer into a small square and sticks it in her back pocket. If nothing else, it would make an excellent addition to her ephemera collection. A collection that has grown exponentially since she arrived in the Karoo. It has grown mostly with interesting leaves or rocks that she picks up in the desert. More than ever, they serve to prove that she exists. Leda reaches the pawnshop, the woman and her wayward daughter a fading pulse in the recesses of her brain. The signage above the shop, in scrolly letters, reads: *The Aesopian*.

A dainty little bell announces her arrival. The place is like no pawnshop Leda has ever seen, and she's seen a few. The front of the store is filled with the usual pawn store suspects - old stereos with exposed wires, dented toasters, handheld vacuum cleaners, exercise equipment, an array of celebrity endorsed appliances and discarded New Year's resolutions. It's the adjoining room, however, that amazes Leda.

She pushes through the PVC strip curtain and looks around. For one, the size of the place is surprising. It's more a warehouse than a store, really. The rarest and best-kept antiques are displayed in the front like crown jewels. They become more cluttered towards the back until it's a maze of furniture stacked to the ceiling. This is not your average pawnshop.

Another thing about the room is that it's cold, a welcome reprieve from the hot, arid air outside. In here, the light is much dimmer, a measure to protect the wood and fibres.

The place seems desolate. The stale smell of confined spaces and ageing wood, not wholly unpleasant, hangs heavy in the air. There is something mystical about the experience. Maybe it's the history of the pieces, the temperature control or the musty scent of lost stories. She can't be sure. But she likes being here.

She gets lost among the rows of precious furniture. She wanders through all the little nooks and crannies, little alcoves of Gothic Revival, Tudor, Ming and Qing Dynasty, a good selection of Boer war and militaria items, and styles that must have been popular with one of the Louis in France at some time.

One aisle ends in a medium-sized recess where clocks of all kinds compete for wall or floor space. In a discordance of clicks and whirrs, they tick off different times. An old grandfather clock in dark cherry with a deep timbre is the unsuccessful conductor trying to set the pace.

Leda lovingly caresses a Queen Anne table made from walnut; its signature cabriole legs sleek, like those of a greyhound.

One aisle turns abruptly into a dead-end. This little alcove is lit by a motley array of lights. Sky lanterns, tiffany lanterns, bell jar lanterns, hand-painted library lamps, pendant lamps in magnificent art deco designs, chandeliers, sconces and multiple other light fixtures with brass finishings. It's quite beautiful, really.

In the crook of the dead-end, conspicuously on display, stands a travelling trunk. Aunt Myra had a similar one, Leda recalls. Except hers had been painted several times and had a big old tear down the side. This one is in mint condition.

She walks towards it, allows her hand to trail over the aged canvas, the iron lattices and leather frame. She imagines its travels. What tales it could tell!

"Luis Vuitton, circa 1858," a voice says behind her, making her jump.

She turns to find a man standing in the aisle behind her. Although he's not a big man, his presence seems to fill the space, an illusion strengthened by his shock of silver-grey hair that frames his face like a mane. He stands perfectly upright, his hands neatly behind his back, shoulders square and precise.

Leda assigns the effect of his presence to the weirdness of his shadow that, in this confined space, is a pitch-black doppelgänger on the furniture tower next to him.

She can't quite tell whether he is a younger man with prematurely grey hair or a much older man with an uncannily youthful face. But when he reaches past her to brush the trunk gingerly, his hands are gnarled and covered in liver spots, convincing her that the latter is true.

"It really is ... spectacular," he says with an intensity that seems unnecessary.

It is then that another man appears at his elbow. He is an identical copy of the other, provided the other had been put in the dryer for a while too long. The same ageless face, the same shock of silver hair, the same old-fashioned waistcoat. But instead of the straight posture distinct to the first, the curvature of this man's spine is overtly convex, bending him into a hunching posture. A funhouse mirror image of the other.

But when he speaks, his voice is as melodic as his twin with the better bearing.

"You must be the clown ... uh, Kramer, Mel's niece?" says the first brother.

"How did you know?" Leda says, surprised.

"Oh, small towns, you know how they are," he says and waves a hand dismissively.

They stand in an unnatural silence for a while. The hum of the AC unit above them, deafening. The bent-man is studying Leda's face. The other is staring past her at the Louis Vuitton trunk.

Caught in the narrow aisle of towering furniture, Leda starts feeling a little claustrophobic. She feels a bit trapped, cornered, but her manners keep her from pushing past the two in search of the dry, warm openness of the outside.

Just as true panic is about to take hold, the front doorbell reaches them. "Ah, I'll get that," says the upright man and excuses himself with a curt nod. "Well," says the other, "shall we move to the office and take a look at –," he gestures at the hatbox under her arm. He steps aside, allowing her to push past him.

He directs her through the labyrinth of old things and through a simple door that leads to what she assumes is a workshop. Dismembered chairs and bits of tables are stacked around the room. Soft-bristled brushes are gathered in paint cans, cotton swabs lie discarded on the bench. The smell of Isopropyl alcohol permeates the air.

A mural depicting Aesop's tales adorns one wall. *The hare and the tortoise. The ant and the grasshopper. The fox and the crow.*

"I am Yadier, and my brother is Leonys," says the man with the stooped body as he gestures for her to place the item on the extended workbench before them. Slipping on white cotton gloves, Yadier examines the hatbox. Then gingerly takes the hat from the box and turns it around in his hands.

"What is that tale?" Leda asks, pointing at one story on the wall. Here the mural is faded, the colours pale and washed out. Seemingly without looking up, the man says, "The prince and the painted lion."

*Never heard of it. "What's the story?"*

His telling of the tale is short, to the point:

A king dreamed that his son would be killed by a lion. To protect the boy from such fate, he locked him in a castle. The young prince was angry at his confinement, and to make the stay more pleasant, the king adorned the court walls with paintings of all types of animals. The miserable young prince blamed lions for his confinement. So, one day, triggered at the sight of the picture of a lion on the wall, he lashed out at the picture. He reached for a

thorn tree to pluck a branch to beat the picture with. But a thorn pierced his finger and caused great pain and inflammation from which he died not many days later.

“And the moral?” Leda asks, “don’t plunder perfectly innocent trees?”

Still not looking up, Yadier says, “bear your troubles bravely rather than trying to escape them ....”

Eventually, he lifts his eyes from the hat and says, “Are you quite sure you are ready to part with it?”

She hesitates then nods decisively. What choice does she have? Besides, even Mel will be happy if there's fresh fruit and milk and anything besides vintage water biscuits in the house. Won't he?

There is the faint sound of a bell as the customer exits the store, and moments later, Leonys enters the workshop. While Yadier examines the hat, Leonys seems to be examining Leda, and soon she starts to squirm under his gaze.

“So, bear your troubles bravely, huh?” Leda blabbers out, her gaze back on the doomed prince and the feline. Running her fingertips over the faded mural. Lost in the hairline cracks that line the young prince’s face, she contemplates the nature of fate and free will for a moment.

When she leaves, it’s with a fist full of cash. Her first stop is Elvin's, where she settles Mel's bill. In the duskiess of the bar, Leda catches a glimpse of Marcia, the anxious mother, alone in a booth, searching for her lost child at the bottom of a highball.

# CHAPTER 20

## Peripeteia

When Leda gets home that afternoon, plastic bags splitting at the seams with groceries, Mel is sitting on the couch nursing a hangover. He doesn't look up, just groans and winces at the sound of a door creaking, a bird chirping, a tree growing ... So when the sound of rustling plastic hits him, he lets out the most annoying note Leda has ever heard and holds it.

Glaring at him through narrow eyes, Leda starts unpacking the bags with gusto. *Clang!* goes the tinned tuna in the cupboard. *Bang!* goes the refrigerator door.

The groan ceases, and Leda unfurls a smug little smile. But the smile doesn't last long because when she looks over, and she sees the big man sitting head-in-hands, shoulders slumped, he looks so vulnerable, defeated.

She stands around wordlessly for a moment, shifting her weight from foot to foot. Then on a whim, she boils the kettle.

A few minutes later, she walks over to the man on the couch.

"Try this," she says and hands him a mug with steam rising from the liquid inside.

He groans again but accepts the offering, sipping at it with cupped hands.

"It's honey and lemon," she says. He doesn't reply.

"Well, okay then ... I'm going to my room," Leda sighs and turns on her heel to leave.

"It's zingy," Mel mumbles under his breath.

"It's what?"

Mel clears his throat, "I said, it's zingy. You know, it has a bite." He takes another sip then adds, "It's nice. Good."

She pauses in the doorway, "It's a Jeremy-thing. He always says it helps ..." her voice trails off.

She suddenly becomes animated, "some say breakfast helps. The greasier, the better. Probably bullshit, but maybe?" She starts towards the kitchen, "what do you say? Breakfast for dinner?"

He looks at her over the rim of the mug. Then, something she assumes is a smile happens to his face. He nods.

That late afternoon they sit together at the kitchen table. Over sunny side up eggs, greasy sausages and toast, they talk.

“Do you miss it? The Strata, I mean,” asks Leda.

Mel snorts, “why would I miss it? It’s the boiler room of the world. The service alley and we’re just janitors, the guys in the overalls supposed to service the machines. Except we’ve no clue how the machines work.”

Leda had never thought of it that way.

“You think it’s a *job*? We’re supposed to be performing some function ...?”

He shrugs, “If it is ... we lost the manual a long time ago.”

They are both quiet for a while.

It’s Mel who breaks the silence, “I use to think life is this game of chance and strategy, you know? Like *Ludo* or *Monopoly* or *Poker*. You throw the dice, move ahead a couple of paces. You get a bad hand ... you’re out. And that’s fine. You tip your hat, say *adieu*, and it’s into the dark, forever ... It turns out there is a third option, stop playing, sit down and shut up. I didn’t think I’d be stuck in the back of the room forced to watch others play.”

“But you can start another game, maybe?” Leda asks, “a different one?”

“Thanks,” he replies mordantly, “I think the metaphor has run its course.”

She agrees.

The silence between them remains even longer this time. By now, all the eggs are gone. The sausages are just smears of grease left on their plates. But neither make a move to get up.

This time it’s Leda who speaks first, “tell me about my mother. Tell me about Anna.”

He looks at her with contemplation. It’s the first time she feels he sees her. Really sees her.

“You look like her...” he says, and she doesn’t mind him saying it.

"Your mother...you know, she tried, right?"

Leda doesn’t answer. What she remembers of her mother is very little. And what she does recall is, with little doubt, a bit rose-tinged with want. She remembers her mother barefoot, wearing jeans and a T-shirt, listening to Johnny Cash CDs. She remembers belting out old 80s anthems alongside her in the car. She remembers how she always kept crayons in

her purse for Leda to draw with. She remembers the enormous void she left when she was gone.

Like Jeremy, her mother had come in many facets. They were like shards of the same broken mirror. She was mostly kind, but there was an anger that every so often shifted her features into those of a bitter and self-destructive thing. And at those times, it was best to stay clear. Only Jeremy could weather *that* storm.

"You know, Anna loved the Strata. She'd sometimes disappear for days and days just wandering the Earth. Then, when she returned from one of her excursions, she'd regale us with stories about what it's like in the Mariana Trench, or what she heard Putin say to his wife or the delicious mini-quiches the Americans serve in the Situation-room.

"That all stopped when you came. She just wanted to be with you. She'd sleep, cook, bathe, breathe with you in her arms, in case you slipped into the Strata. But it took its toll on her. So, the family intervened."

"The meds."

He nods and looks away.

That is the sum of Leda and Mel's deep and frank conversation, never to be repeated again. And although they have not become best friends, they've become family. Their conversations, still curt but comfortable, their insults affectionate.

When Leda returns to the house one afternoon after wandering the desert, every cupboard door stands ajar. Mel sits among the gaping doors, staring blank-eyed at nothing in particular.

"Woaw, did you have the Berserkers over?"

When he responds, his voice is barely audible: "'Where is it?'"

His demeanour strongly discourages any further glib remark that comes to her tongue.

"I'm sorry?" she says instead and steps out of her sandals.

"Where is it?" he hisses again, and this time he slowly turns his head to look at her. To Leda, it feels as if she's in the crosshairs of a sniper.

"I don't know what ..." she starts, but he interrupts, his voice still low:

"The hat," he says, "the '59 Stetson. Where is it?"

Leda feels herself go cold. She tries to appear nonchalant, "oh, that old thing. You've been eating it for the past week."



He looks at her, confused.

“Well,” she says defensively, “where do you think all the food came from this week? I sold it in town.”

Instead of the eruption of anger Leda expected, Mel's reaction is much worse. He sinks down on the couch and says nothing.

“I had to make a plan! I had to ... Mel?”

Nothing.

"Mel ... I ... I'm sorry ...."

He doesn't yell. He doesn't even look at her. “Oh,” is all he says. The anger or irritation or whatever it is he's feeling is turned inwards, manifested outwardly only by his hulking shoulders and the twitch of his heavy brow.

*Shit, I ruined it.* Leda feels like punching herself in the face. *I ruined everything. Things were going so well ...*

“Fine, I'll say it. I was irresponsible. A stupid girl. Well, you're not my father.”

Her outburst is met with stony silence.

She feels like she's kicked a dog. As if she's put a cigarette out on a baby. *Shit.* She ruined everything. Buying the hat back is not an option. She's spent all the money. Well, most of it. She could just take out this regret she's feeling ... but she'd still have to look at Mel's stupid sad face. Maybe she could ask for the hat back. They would understand, surely? No, they paid top dollar for it. There is no way ... through the carousel of impossibility, an idea is forming in her head. And it doesn't involve asking. Maybe, at last, this stupid ability will be good for something.

That night Leda takes a drive into town. It's barely past eleven, but she's sure the two brothers will be tucked up in bed dreaming about Kaiser Wilhelm's underpants or Stalin's snuff box or whatever weird memorabilia-related wet dreams they have.

She drifts into one of the parking bays in front of the *Hole in the Bucket*, a good couple of meters from the brothers' shop. It must be a slow night at the *Hole* as there are only three other cars in the lot. Yellow light and Billy Joel spill from the open door, and Leda can't think of a more apt soundtrack to the scene.

She sits quietly in the car for a while. She has no real strategy. Getting into the shop is easy, but getting the hat out will require some initiative. Perhaps there's a key conveniently

tucked under an old Western spittoon at the door? Or concealed within a book-safe version of *War and Peace* used to hide contraband during some dark history. *With some luck!* Maybe there will be a window, a backdoor left unchecked. Perhaps a bit of good old breaking and exiting will be required.

She sinks down low in the car and slips into the Strata; her jeans and tee remaining in a puddle on the pedals down below. Then down the street she goes and right through *The Aesopian's* shopfront with its shelves full of used things - an old blender, a mini-fridge, a multitude of worthless knickknacks – and emerges unsure in the middle of the front room.

To her relief, the corners are clear of security cameras. No blinking lights indicating silent alarms. No dogs on guard or guards standing watch. Just the goodwill of a town where the consensus is that the harsh environment is all the opposition you need. Well, maybe there's *one* benefit to small towns.

In the adjoining room, beyond the strip curtain, her eyes adjusting to the low light, Leda scans the voluminous space. Gone are the feelings of amity she'd felt there during the day. The cool air feels less like reprieve than it does a morgue. An old Victorian-style tailor's bust becomes a headless spectre. An armoire on ball-and-claw legs becomes a crouching ghoul with malformed feet. Stuff that may have been much loved at one point in time now waits like ambush predators for prey to amble by. The ruby reds, emerald greens, turquoise blues, warm woods, polished patinas have been drained from them by the lost light. The scars left by epic histories, personal tragedies and everyday toil that had seemed charming in the daytime now seem like wounds that never quite healed.

In the big room, there *are* security mirrors, the convex ones that cling to the ceiling like dome-shaped eyes made from mercury, lancing together each scene in their hive-mind to have dominion over all.

She locates herself in the mirror above her. The woman looking back is tiny, mangled, naked. She is so grotesque in her fragility that Leda looks away quickly. Some believe that mirrors reflect one's true nature, the *shadow soul*.

Above her, the doppelgänger mimics her every move.

They say you can reverse bad luck from a broken mirror if you immerse the shards in south-flowing water for seven hours.

*Come on!* Leda shakes the fear from her shoulders. Squares up. *What nonsense is this? What can happen? I can get jumped by a 19-century mahogany bench? Or accosted by an Old English hat rack?*

You can also, they say, grind the shards of a broken mirror into a fine powder to reverse bad luck. Others say that putting the broken pieces in a bag and burying it will accomplish the same thing.

Tentatively Leda wades further into the sea of towering shelves.

She takes aisle for aisle. From above, her twisted reflection is passed off from one silver eye to the next. Some say such infinite reflections open a doorway for the devil.

She finds old clocks, music boxes, writing boxes, game boxes, old tinderboxes, vases, so many vases and other porcelain things.

Then, among a display of snuff boxes, musty books, and an old saddle, she finds the hat neatly displayed on top of its hatbox.

The sought item under her arm, she starts her search for an easy exit. She winds back the same way she came, or at least, she thinks she does but walks herself into a dead-end. She doubles back but realizes she hadn't been in this aisle at all before.

Suddenly desperate for this to be over, she hastens her pace. It's as if the floor space has doubled, tripled, as if the number of aisles is growing exponentially in her confusion. Every avenue becomes a dead end. Every corridor, a blind alley.

The air conditioning system hums. Her footsteps echo. Each time the winding passages take her past the big grandfather clock, its tick tick tick becomes louder, creating the impression that she's walking in circles. tick, tick, tick tick TICK TICK tick tick says the clock. It's so relentless that for a moment she believes that it's stalking her.

Exasperated, she puts the hat down and sinks into the Strata to locate a window through the clutter but even then, all she can see is a jumble of stuff. So, she walks *through* the aisles towards the outer walls. She walks through a shelf with Dutch ceramics, an armoire with ornate doors and a body stuffed in a large trunk.

She stops short. *WTF?*

She backtracks.

*Is that ...?*

*Yep. That's a dead body. A dead person body.*

She exits the Strata. She's standing in front of the Louis Vuitton wardrobe trunk that she had admired the other day. Above it, the downpour of antique lighting still dangles from its strings.

Slowly she submerges again. A leg, an arm, head, torso - a body! - curled up in a foetal position and propped up in the large compartment at the front of the suitcase.

She exits the Strata again and looks about her. *What to do?*

With quivering hands, she starts undoing the latch of the trunk. She pulls open the lid, and the body thuds to the floor. *Thud*. Not tumbles or sprawls the way you do out of a tree or off a ladder. *Thud* like a rigid dead thing that has been dead for a while.

Leda stifles a scream.

On the floor lies the dead thing. A woman? A girl? It's hard to tell with the chin tucked into the chest, the short, choppy bob like a shroud across the face.

For a foolish second, Leda wonders how she may have gotten inside the case, tries to find an innocent explanation for the girl's predicament. She's heard stories of prisoners of war who, years after their ordeal, choose to sleep on floors or inside closets instead of beds. Maybe she suffocated? Maybe she ... But no, she didn't do this to herself. Someone had tucked her into the large jacket and tie compartment of this vintage suitcase.

Leda wants to panic. This situation calls for panic, surely? Yes, panic is entirely acceptable under these circumstances. But her inner voice interjects. *No, wait. Think.*

Well, she could scream. Screams are, after all, a wonderful universal language explicitly designed to activate not only the auditory cortex but also trigger the brain's emotional centre involved in fear processing. This she learnt while doing research for an ad about primal scream and peyote retreat.

So, scream. Who comes running? The Thin White Duke and his knockoff brother? And the most likely the murderers. There is no way people from the pub will hear and swoop in to save the day.

*She can run. Now that's an idea.*

*Or she'll submerge with the girl. Leave her somewhere to be found, maybe? Yes. No.*

*No. How will they know who did this? No, this can't go unpunished. What if this is something they do ... and have done before?*

*That's not her problem. She can just leave. Go home. Or go somewhere else. Yes, maybe it's time for somewhere else.*

*Wait! She can alert the police. Lead them here? And tell them what?*

*Think! THINK!*

*Okay, what if she smuggles out the suitcase and leaves it in front of the pub?*

*Undoubtedly, the case would lead the authorities to the brothers?*

The plan is flimsy, full of holes. She has no idea how to pull this off, but she's made up her mind. With great difficulty, she starts to shove the stiffened limbs back into the suitcase.

A shuffle. A shadow.

Perhaps out of reflex or fright, she sinks into the Strata just in time to dodge the malformed shape hurtling towards her. It's Yadier who slams through the space where she had been with such force that he tumbles headfirst into the crumpled corpse and the wardrobe, felling the shelf unit against which it was standing. The crash of the shelf and its contents is loud to reverberate into the Strata.

The thought of their miasmas mingling is so disgusting to Leda that she scrambles to her feet inside the Strata and backs away into the adjoining aisle. Through the gossamer shapes of old things, she watches the Frankensteinean tangle of misshaped man, designer wardrobe and dead girl.

The man struggles to his feet like an ungainly stink beetle and looks about him in distress. With his gnarled body, clawed hands and wild hair, he is the epitome of horror, a therianthrope whose silhouette shifts from beast to human to beast to something in between.

"Girl!" he snarls, "girl!"

Like a blind man, he tears at the air around him, lashing out at his invisible foe.

"Come out, girl! Come out here so I can kill you, dead!"

Beyond the angry little troll, the hair had fallen from the dead girl's face, and she looks up at Leda with unseeing eyes. Leda remembers that face. A girl, a dog, a smile on a yellow picture held by yellowed fingers linked to a thin arm feeding into a concave chest with jutting collarbones standing guard over hanging breasts that shield a dog-tired heart.

And Leda gets angry.

Her miasma flashes into an orange-red, thick, churning. It floods her major muscles, her thighs, her core, her arms, her chest. It engulfs her fingers, her head, her eyes. It burns in her face, spurring her to action. *Inside* the blue, lynx-like, she circles the man,. She materializes behind him for just long enough to knock him into the opposite shelf.

He goes down, taking the shelf with him, triggering a chain reaction that sends adjacent shelves toppling to the ground one after the other with a deafening echo.

As the shelves topple, their charges crash to the floor - a porcelain bedpan explodes as it hits the ground. An enamel pot spirals down one aisle, its getaway ending in a sad undulation that grows small and then lies still.

The cannonade of falling things is loud enough to draw the devil and certainly the mainstays from the bar down the road. People are sure to be filing into the shop any moment. The domino effect only comes to an end when a shelf, three, four rows in, showers its contents onto a mountain of low wooden chests stacked on top of one another.

The bug-beetle-man is clambering to turn onto his back, his feet kicking like sad little insect appendages. The unearthly forms of his face twisting in fury.

“What are you? What are you?” he screams up at her.

A footfall, faint but urgent, an aisle away alerts Leda to the other brother, and she quickly submerges again.

When Leonys appears in the alcove, his anger is alive, hot, bristling. His miasma claws the air like a nest of snakes striking indiscriminately.

“What have you done? Have you gone mad?” he yells at his brother.

“She’s here! That girl, she’s here!” the fallen brother yells, getting to his feet at last, and pointing about him wildly.

“Yes!” the other brother says, “Move her! Move her now! People will be here any moment.” And sure enough, from outside, the clamouring of a small group reaches the warehouse.

“No!” the gnarled brother roars in frustration, “She’s *here*. *She* did this!”

A few steps bring Leonys in front of his brother, grasping his shoulders, their noses almost touching. “No, Yadier, brother. You are confused! I promise you she’s good and dead!” he insists. His grey eyes are stormy under the weight of his brows.

The impaired sibling looks up into his brother’s eyes, his words punctuated with bubbles of spittle as he whispers. “No ... the hat girl. The hat girl. The Stetson ... She’s here ....” His eyes roll around in their red-ringed sockets to indicate that she is here, now.

Leonys relents the grasp on his brother’s shoulders but does not let go.

From outside, they hear. “Mr Ahrens! Leonys! Is everything okay? We’re coming in!” It’s Elvin’s voice. “We’ve called the police, but we’re coming in!”

Leonys lets go of his brother's shoulders abruptly. "No time now. We have to go. Get away, grab what you can. The passports are in the office, you know where. We go now!" He jumps into gear and starts racing towards the office.

"But the girl ...?" One last look from his brother silences Yadier.

They're getting away! Leda realizes. These monstrous, vile creatures may have been plotting their exit for years! What if they disappear just to do this again?

In future, Leda will maintain that it was a coincidence. That she did not see Leonys return from the office, nor heard the shot that made its way to her from the muzzle of a tiny, gilded gun. But she submerges just in time for the bullet to blast through space, ripping through the air and slamming into Yadier.

The cry that escapes Leonys's mouth is unearthly, feral, guttural, inhuman. He rushes forward and throws himself on his brother's crumpled body.

"Leonys! Yadier! What's happening?" the voices come from outside.

Leonys leaps from Yadier's dead body and screeches into the air, "where the fuck are you! Where are you! Show yourself!"

Leda watches his performance from inside the Strata. It seems like the same one that had transpired a few moments ago. Except in this one, the forms and shapes of the face and body had been put back into perfect order.

From outside, a loud crash. A dustbin being flung through a window? In the far distance, the sound of an approaching siren.

With one last agonizing wail, Leonys leaves his brother and runs towards the office. From *inside*, Leda follows him, remaining critically aware of his wicked little gun and how lucky she had just been. She is right there when he grabs a briefcase, a jacket, a pouch with several papers, a first edition copy of Poe's *Tamerlane and Other Poems*. He runs right through her as he quietly slips out the back door. In the meantime, the warehouse is filling with voices, and Leda knows there is no good way to explain her own naked presence here and instead, she follows the man into the night.

Outside, the sky is so dark it must break the Bortle scale. Already the rear lights of Leonys's car are tiny, hateful eyes squinting in the distance. The stagnant cold closes around her skin like plastic, and she shivers alone in the alley.

Then she spots another car a short way down the passage. She recognizes it as the only Uber in town, an orange-beige vehicle driven by the local pothead, Desmond-Somebody.

Through the windshield, she can see his face illuminated by a cellphone. His manner tells her he is blissfully unaware of the drama around him.

Reaching the car, she pulls open the driver's door. The young man inside greets her with a sheepish smile and takes an earbud from one ear. "Oh, hey", he says. "What's going on?"

"I need your car!" she says.

"Uh, I'm off the clock. I was just taking a minute ...."

"Can't talk", Leda says and pulls at the muddled young man who flops out of the car like a ragdoll.

"Hey, what the hell, man!"

"Shit, sorry, sorry", Leda says, "I'm sorry, but this is life and death."

"Geez, dude, you squashed my roach ...."

"Sorry," Leda says and shifts in behind the wheel. She affords the man-boy another look, "I'm sorry", she says and closes the door. *I'm going to stop this maniac, no matter what.*

Why she never learned how to drive shift, Leda doesn't know. All she knows is that a minute and a lot of cajoling later, she's in the passenger seat, and Desmond-the-Uber driver is back in the driving seat.

"You ruined my roach, you know," he pouts, slotting the car into drive.

"Just drive," says Leda, the embarrassment flush on her cheeks.

"Where to?"

"A car just sped off here; it shouldn't be too hard to find him. Just go that way."

Desmond-the-wannabe-Uber-driver coaxes the car onto the road, and they leave *The Aesopian*, now flooded by people and outcries of angst, behind.

It doesn't take long before they see lights up ahead.

"Just stick with this car," Leda says.

The chase is a frightful one. The further they get from town, the darker it gets. The light from their headlights seems ineffective in piercing the dark. As it hits the dunes, the road becomes more winding.

Then they round one bend and almost collide with Leonys's car. It has flipped and lies on its roof, its wheels still spinning uselessly in the air. From the wreckage crawls a bloodied and bruised Leonys. While Desmond phones the police, Leda rushes towards the car and drags Leonys from the wreck. Although his hair is matted with blood, he doesn't seem



seriously injured, so Leda props him up against a dune and sits next to him. In the cold of night, their backs against a dune and their eyes squinting against the headlights, Leda turns to the man next to her, “how does it feel being the miserable prince for a change?” He looks at her with white-hot hatred but doesn’t say anything. She just smiles into the headlights and listens as the sirens draw close.

Desmond-the-wannabe-Uber-driver is not feeling happy. This was supposed to be a chill night, one or two fares, then home for Netflix and some good, homegrown Indica. But *Hole in the bucket* patrons ended up doing some Vin Diesel-shit that he didn’t sign up for. Sure, the chick is cute and naked for reasons he forgot to enquire about, but then she ruined a perfectly good spliff; they saw a car wreck and then sat in Adam Apollies’s police station for a good goddamn five hours answering questions he had no answers to.

Leda gets a lift home in the police van. She’s wearing police training bottoms and a sweater from the jail’s lost-and-found. While the story of the murderous brothers is sure to leave the town’s people mute and out of sorts, they will tell the salacious story of Leda and Desmond’s wild kink romp through the dunes with great relish. Leda couldn’t care less. That narrative is easier to explain than the truth.

It had been a long night. And when the van stops in front of Mel’s house and the doors open, the morning light is blinding. She’s on her way from the van to the house when pain rips through her body and brings her to her knees. Her face twists in agony.

She can’t pinpoint the hurt. It’s everywhere. Like a full-body fever, it makes her shiver with cold while she’s burning up at the same time.

She knows what this is.

Usually, by *this* time, she’s cleared the emotions from her body like unwanted weeds. Discarded them to ensure she feels nothing. But the sun has long since set and risen, the time come and gone, and now every emotion she’s avoided assails her at once. Anger, fear, sadness, shame, and even joy she may have denied herself twist together into one nebulous ache. It fills every cell, from her sagittal suture to the tips of her toes. It swells in her chest until it feels like she might explode. It’s as if every tragic tale ever written, every shocking headline that has shaken her world, every glint on the edge of a blade, every tender moment

she's ever felt, every song that has moved her, is being etched on the connective tissue that gives structure to her body.

And there is no stopping it. She has to ride it out. She has to sit with every feeling, tender and raw, that she's avoided for the past few weeks.

So, there she lies, a little ball in the dust. The Karoo grit in her teeth, behind her eyes.

Gradually the pain disperses. It flattens out into every cell until it's a deep dull ache.

Despite the reprieve, she stays down on her knees. There in the dust, she has a moment of clarity, the pain an antiseptic against the deceptions she's let loose in her brain.

Ignoring her emotions had not made the bad things disappear. It had just moved them out of frame for a while. That which had always been there beyond the viewfinder slowly slipped back into focus. Will is dead. She killed. Her hand *killed* ... someone. A person. A shitty one, but a *person*. It happened. They're gone, never coming back ... Will ...

And with this pain of finality comes a reminder of things that *can* be changed ... Jeremy. Jeremy is still here, and he needs her. She reaches past the shame to clutch at some courage. The painted lion and the prince. She must go back. She must save Jeremy. The idea consumes her whole being. She wonders if this is how heroic people feel all the time.

As if from the skies, Mel's hands grasp her shoulders. He gently raises her to her feet. It may be Mel who picks her up out of the dust and leads her into the house, but it's Leda herself who pushes the hood from her face, drops the earphones to her neck and lifts her chin to the light. Maybe Joseph Campbell was right, not all who hesitate are lost.

# CHAPTER 21

## Lovers unite in unexpected ways

Leda's newborn heroism extends only to a reach and rescue mission. She isn't built for revenge or retribution or any of that. So, the plan pretty much involves saving Jeremy, removing their bargaining chip and hoping Karma will take care of the rest. Then run like Mel had. Like Will had.

Dr Kruger walks into his office with his nose buried in a book. It's a book about Hollywood in the 60s. He misses the glamour, the grandiosity of the time. Nowadays it's all salacious sleaze and twerking.

When Leda speaks up from where she's sitting behind his desk, the book tumbles from his hands onto the floor.

"Good morning, doctor."

Blood drains from his powder-white face. He sinks into one of the visitors' chairs across from her.

"Miss Keen --," he starts.

"Save it," she says.

His mouth shuts, and he sits there dumbstruck.

She's wearing his spare white coat. The pocket grandly embroidered with the name of a pharmaceutical company.

"When?" she asks.

"Huh?"

"When did it go wrong for you?"

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

"That's even if you're a *real* doctor."

"Yes," his voice creaks, "I'm a doctor." Never before have those words been spoken with such shame.

She lets him sit in his discomfort for a while. After a few moments of tortuous silence, Leda walks around the desk. Her feet are bare. Her hands on the armrests of his chair, she peers into his eyes.

“At least tell me why? There is already so much fear in the world, and it’s free for the taking ... why create more?”

Those round little button eyes behind his glasses look past her at something else, drawn there as if beyond his control.

“Answer me,” she insists softly.

“It’s purer this way, a primal, untainted fear brought on by the morphine hallucinations,” he swallows hard, his eyes flickering from Leda to his object of obsession behind her, “no other contaminants – love, hope, happiness ....”

Leda follows his eyes to a tall cabinet behind her.

“I guess it’s not your dignity you keep in that cabinet?”

The doctor takes the opportunity to push past Leda and rush for the cabinet. He jerks open the top drawer and grabs a small vial from it. Dropping to his haunches, he grunts as he inhales the dust in short successive snorts. The way he covets the little vial and its contents, his eyes bulging, both hands clasping the receptacle, brings the praying mantis impression Leda had of him full circle.

Then his body goes flaccid. With his back against the cabinet, his legs pop out in front of him, and his face grows serene.

“I’m sorry,” he slurs, “I just do as I’m told ...I’m sorry.”

The smile on his lips forms a sharp contrast with his eyes, wet with tears.

She’s done with this piece of shit. He’s nothing, nobody. She needs one more thing from him, an address.

With one last look at the man, Leda exits the office. She resents the fact that amid the hatred and disgust she feels for him, there’s also a sense of pity. If only she could rout out a single feeling.

In the ward, the “patients” lie unmoving under their white sheets. On her way to Jeremy’s bed, she pauses at Libby’s. The girl is so young! Yet, that flush of youth is drained from her face. In the next bed is a middle-aged woman, someone’s mother? Wife? Or is she some street person simply rounded up to be harvested of her humanity? Next to her, an old man. His face is a map of all the places he’s been, people he’s loved, things he’s seen. The neat little ridges of a scar rise from his chin, a shaving accident, or perhaps a game of catch with a son, a grandson, gone wrong? She cannot know, but what she does know is that these

people all had lives; there might be loved ones looking for them. She forces herself to look away from the man's face with all its stories. What can she do?

She goes to Jeremy and folds her arms around him. Together they sink into the Strata. She folds space after space then surfaces with Jeremy, still asleep, in a bedroom with dark wood and heavy drapes. She makes him comfortable in the bed. He groans. His eyelids flutter, but his eyes don't open. She spends a few more minutes there, then grabs something from the cupboard and heads downstairs.

Leo Meynhart sits in his favourite chair, his laptop in his lap. He's not fond of risk, but as of late, he's gotten the sense that he has to get into the bitcoin game sooner rather than later. So, he's reading everything on the subject he can get his hands on. Maybe he *is* risk-averse, but he has some good instincts about these things. If only he could say the same of his instinct about people... I mean, you can only have your heart trampled that many times. A movement in his periphery, on the stairs.

"Leda?"

She offers him a smile, strained but pleased to see him.

"Hi, Leo," she says simply, "he's asleep upstairs ... look after him, okay?"

His mouth ajar, Leo watches her cross the living room floor. At the front door, she pauses, "He loves you, you know ... he's just, well, just Jeremy."

Without another word, the girl opens the front door and walks out. His mouth still open, the cat still clinging onto his tongue, he looks up towards the bedroom then back at the closed front door. Was she a hallucination? And was the hallucination wearing his oversized gold shirt and a pair of chinos? He puts the laptop aside and slowly ascends the stairs.

# CHAPTER 22

## Headshot

Errol Ellis takes the stairs to his runup two-by-two. He'd parked the little electric blue sportscar on a yellow line at the curbside even though he knows it will be carpeted in Jacaranda flowers before the night is out.

But his car, or rather the rental company's car, is the last thing on Errol's mind as he bounds up the stairs. His step appears light, testimony to how well-rehearsed he is supposed to be rather than indicative of his frame of mind.

Passing his reflection in the foyer mirror, he stops in his tracks. He adjusts his hair, orchestrates his mouth into a smile. It travels up his cheeks but stops short before the eyes and vanishes completely when he leans in to scrutinise the shadows pooling in his sockets.

He knows the dream is over. To be honest, he barely cares anymore. Sure, he worshipped at the altar of Stanislavski and genuflected under the proscenium arch but had this dream really ever been his? Or was it his bequest? Handed down by Mommy-dearest, who that one time got really close to getting cast in *Showgirls*?

If she'd still been alive, she'd be plying him with her bumper sticker-wisdoms right about now - *you gotta be in it to win it, eye-of-the-tiger, big match mentality, my boy, personality!* - and all that horse shit. It's what she used to say before the diaper advert auditions, the Legoland auditions, the acne-cream auditions.

That was his life. Waiting rooms of starry-eyed parents spoon-feeding little Johnny or Jenny their lines before it's their turn to shine. Then in later years, waiting rooms of starry-eyed waiters, food delivery people and *au pairs* trying to be something some strangers in a room want them to be. And with several advertisements under your belt and numerous catalogue shoots for your portfolio, you'd think Hollywood was just one astute casting agent away ...

But you can take only so many casting directors telling you that, frankly, you're too pretty to play the male lead in a pithy rom-com. Maybe he could pull off the heroine's gay bestie or the obnoxious spoilt rich kid who gets taught a lesson. But even those remained elusive like a mirage that disappears just as it starts taking shape.

And when your agent phones, it's for "a brilliant opportunity" to be the mascot at an alien hand syndrome charity event where they dress you like a hand showing the peace sign. Did it not occur to anyone that from the back, you're just flipping people off?

It had become painfully clear that you don't get what you want just because you really, *really* want it. He was starting to think that the pinnacle of his success would be his stock photography portfolio: Man looking out over field. Man laughing on a horse. The benign patriarch. The enamoured lover. Man sipping coffee.

He strikes a pose in the mirror: Contemplative man. Sad man. Wicked man.

And before long, you're just another dog walker for the rich with headshots in your backpack. And soon, sucking cock is on the menu, but the right cock never comes through the hole, and it's always more hole than glory.

And he's glad his mother is dead because being second-billed on *My stepbro came home when I was stuck in the dryer* is not exactly the dream she had in mind. For him? For herself?

So, this latest "role" was not the weirdest thing he's ever done.

In fact, when the guy with the shiny dome and rat pack suit offered him a shipload of money to pretend to be some do-gooder and seduce a girl, he didn't think about it twice.

Besides, his mother had always said that a star is *agreeable*, a star is likeable. A star is *outgoing, over-enthusiastic; a star listens, a star takes direction. A star doesn't ask too many questions.*

He strikes a pose like in his favourite headshot. The one where he has a hand in his neck, his collar slightly turned up: *Man looking handsome as hell* - perfect for his current character, Chris Quin.

Sure, he knows it's not a *real* role; the emo dust hasn't mused his brain that much yet. What he *does* know is that it's designed for an audience of one, that it's the best paying gig he's ever had, and that it's part of something he can't possibly understand or perhaps even want to. And then there are the job benefits that come in a tiny vial filled with sea-green crystals.

And boy was he smashing the romantic lead. If only those casting directors could see his latest work.

For the role, he invoked the spirit of Sanford Meisner, whose venerated technique requires you to focus on the other characters as though they are real – pretty easy in this case.

*Man looking pleased with himself.* It's not often that an actor is given such free rein.

"Be whoever you want to be," the man, Alexi, whose head seemed to have grown past his hair, had said, "as long as you sell it. As long as you are enough to be loved – we'll do the rest."

He summons the smile back to his face, and this time it reaches his eyes. *Man satisfied with life.*

Turning from the mirror, he takes a vial from his back pocket then snarfs the contents of it on the ridge of his hand.

He was named Errol, after the actor Errol Flynn whom his mother adored. But the name has long been out of vogue. So, for this role, he'd chosen the name "Chris Quin" as he thought it was powerful yet sexy. Solid but seeped in mystery. Approachable but enigmatic. *Enigmatic*, he's always liked that word. He'd kept the backstory simple: he's an engineer who has given up his life in Silicon Valley to care for his sister, who had fallen gravely ill. He toyed with being bisexual, maybe have some endearing affliction, a limp or a lisp, but that is hard to maintain, so he let it go.

He holds the vial at eye level. A panic rises in his chest. He's running low.

This stuff's like nothing he's had before. The high is high, but the low ... *godamnit*, the low is bareboned existential dread.

He hadn't heard much from his employer since the last wad of cash came to the door. He was starting to think the gig might be over.

A knock on the door sees his features arrange themselves into an amicable resting face. *Always be ready*, his mother would say, *Marilyn Monroe was discovered in a munitions factory, remember.*

He shares a dazzling smile with his reflection before opening the door.

"Chris," says Leda and launches herself into his arms.

"Leda?" is all he manages before she flings her arms around him.

"First, I'm not crazy. I thought I was, and maybe I was, but I'm not now. And I don't blame you if you think I've gone mad because it is crazy, okay? But hear me out."

He just stands there, looks at her, an Easter-Island moai made of flesh.



"Okay," says Leda and takes a deep breath, "okay...your sister, my dad ... are in great danger."

And she starts telling him the most incredible story about hidden worlds and evil cartels and emotions that turn to intoxicants. And as she speaks, Errol collects himself, this is what acting is all about, he hears his mother say: Keep it together. Improvise. Don't break character. But the girl is quite obviously mad, and how the hell did she get his address?

*First position. And action!* "Leda, okay, I hear you. I believe you. That is shocking. Sit. Breathe. I'll phone the police – wait here."

At the door, he turns around, "If you're a bird, I'm a bird."

"Huh?"

"It's from *The Notebook*. Ryan Gosling? Rachel McAdams?" Oh, you know what, never mind – I'll be back."

In his room, he makes sure that the door is shut. He paces up and down the rug that lines the window. *What to do? What to do?*

His head hurts, the residue of the emo dust high weighing him down like lead in his blood. What to do? This wasn't in the script. *Okay, think*. The girl is obviously not well. She needs help. Maybe a special kind of help.

He rummages through a bag and digs out a card, pearl-white with a name in black. He makes the call.

"She's here, the girl," he says when a modulated male voice answers.

"Mr Ellis," says the voice.

"Yes, she's here. I dunno what to do."

"Who?" asks the voice on the other side.

"*The girl*, the girl from the clinic."

There's a palpable silence on the line for a moment. A beat. Then: "Whatever you do, don't let her leave."

Leda rises from the sofa when he re-enters the room.

"They're not coming, are they? The police?"

"No, no ... they'll come. We have to wait."

"We can't, the police can't help. *We* have to fix this."

A determination has settled around her mouth, her eyes bore into him.

"Are you coming? Come, we must go ... trust me—"

Before she can reach the door, Errol smacks her in the head with the closest thing at hand, a giant Betty Boop figurine.

With Betty all coy and demure in his hand, he stands over the girl sprawled on the carpet. *Shitshitshitshitshitshitshit*. This isn't good. This isn't good at all. But what could he do? He slips one hand into his pocket. The only thing that makes sense right now is the feel of the tiny vial in his palm.

Mel paces the living room like a caged lion. His rule of thumb has always kept him safe, don't get attached, don't get involved, don't stick your neck out.

He'd thought Leda had learnt this lesson. That she was too smart to stick her head into a hornets' nest. Yet this morning, the sun had barely peeked over Skoenmakersberg, and she was off in that jealousy to save Jeremy.

Jeremy. He'd always been a complicated man, a perfect match for Anna. Anna. Thoughts of his sister turn to thoughts of Leda as a child. Small and unprepared, fragile. And so goddamn stupid. Mel feels like the "Ugh" sound. His skeleton goes to the floor, the meat dangles uselessly from it. His mind is a reel of Leda. The Leda who moped around the house, who made him breakfast sometimes, who painted, who tried to get to grips with the world, who was the same girl who'd lassoed him in a laughing loop when she was a child. And now that child's walking into certain death. And the thought becomes unbearable. He must bring her back.

*How to go about it?* If he still had the Strata, he could just fold the world and bring her to her senses. But he cannot. He can drive to the city ... come face to face with Ian Sabien. He, too, is just a man, after all.

Mel sits on the bed for a long time. Or what feels like a long time.

He's spent most of his life running from these people, hiding like a pussy in a convent of his own making. One devoted only to his perverse gospel of self-preservation and the desire to die.

But what if it could be different? What if the writing is not on the wall? He stands up slowly like a man in a dream state. Just what if an old man can redeem himself? He lifts the hat off the top of the cupboard and slaps the dust from it. What if an immovable object can be moved? It's a nice hat. Quality fur felt with a cattleman crease crown, interior leather sweatband. It's not the ornamental? vintage hat. This one is for wearing. For doing. It's a

getting-shit-done hat. He caresses the silver-tone buckle on the side of the crown with his thumb. Then deftly spins the hat in his hand and flips it onto his head as if it was just yesterday he performed the action. He finds his eyes in the mirror. They are caught in the heavy creases of his lids. The eyes of an old man. But for the first time in a very long time, there is something else as well.

He turns away from the mirror with a new resolve. He still isn't convinced that determinism isn't real. He just thinks that maybe somewhere, a butterfly has fluttered its wings and changed the course of things. He will go back to Johannesburg and help the girl, as best he can. Of what use he will be, he isn't sure. And if this is a suicide mission, so be it.

Had there been anyone to see, they would have witnessed the sloped shoulders square up ever so slightly, his chin setting just a bit more firmly. He takes one last look at himself in the mirror and promptly decides to ditch the hat.

So, leaving the prized Stetson on the bed, Mel Stetson Kramer exits his little house, and his little life, and steers his steed towards Joburg City.

# CHAPTER 23

## Ring of fire

The moment Leda comes to, she knows she's in trouble. She knows this because the blood drying above her left eye assures her of it. As does the razor-sharp headache gnawing at her optical nerve, the cable ties slicing through her wrists. She doesn't know what had caused the sharp pain in her side, but the pain is only tolerable in the moments between breaths.

Then she feels the heat. She's surrounded by it. Hissing, crackling flames encircle her, leaping three, four meters high. But this is not some wildfire. Each flame is identical, controlled, emanating from a series of nozzles protruding from a cement floor like flames from a blow torch, no, a flame thrower. The telling hiss of some flammable gas, butane maybe, betrays the secret of what's stoking the flames.

And she knows this is a prison designed specifically for her and people like her. Enclosed. Trapped.

She can discern a warehouse beyond the flames. An industrial extractor fan, empty pallet racks stacked to the steel-beamed ceiling. Lining the top wall, a panel of glass brick windows. A big warehouse. Very big.

She struggles to her feet. Pain like hot-white javelins tears through her body. But she cannot think about that now. She starts to pace, the heat from the torches confining her movement to the very centre of the cell.

Something moves a distance away. Someone standing up from a chair. A door opens and closes. The flames are so close together it's hard to see between the gaps. The door again, and someone enters. Soft footsteps cross the floor, what seems like forever, before coming to a standstill in front of the fire cage.

"Miss Keen," says the voice, "nice to see you again. My apologies for the fire ... very dramatic, I know, but you know how it is..."

Leda pays the man no attention. Why should she humour him? She refuses to engage. Instead, she drops into the Strata. But, of course, even on the *inside* the flames are

impenetrable, incandescent columns of white-hot lasers. The heat is more contained, confined within the fire itself. She can get closer to it, but when she makes contact, the pain slices through her hand and sends her reeling out of the Strata back into the world.

Clutching the injured hand, she clenches her jaw and a scream forces through her grinding teeth. At least the cable ties had come off.

"I think both you and I know this is futile ..." the man says. But Leda is not listening. She submerges again and again. Looking for a quirk in the Strata's physics she could exploit to get out. Five, six, seven times, she goes under, searching for a way out. Through, over, under. But nothing.

The man stands watching her the whole time like a horse wrangler waiting for a wild mare to exhaust herself. "I know you can hear me, Miss Keen, Leda. Can I call you Leda?"

She emerges once again, her nakedness of no matter to either of them. The pain in her hand is acute, but it seems far away, like a problem for another day.

"I think you'll find me quite reasonable ..." says the man.

Leda is determined to be the opposite of reasonable. She takes a deep breath and sinks into the Strata, set to stay on the *inside* for as long as possible.

The man, however, seems unperturbed. He makes a gesture, and someone drags a chair up to the bars of fire.

"Wowzer, that *is* hot!" he says conversationally and sets the chair back a pace.

"It's a pity about the discomfort and the theatrics, what's next? Sharks with laser beams? Feels like I should be stroking a cat, menacingly."

*Wait. That voice. That tone, like an old friend shooting the breeze.* She can see only a sliver of his face between two flames – an eye, a cheekbone, floppy hair curving towards the corner of a generous mouth. She *knows* this man.

"Now, now, Miss Keen, we both know you can't stay under forever ..." His eyes search the empty space beside her.

From *inside*, she moves as close to the fire bars as possible to get a good look at the man. As good as possible anyway. *You should try the pie, it's from another world.*

She knows him, the man from the café. She'd thought him ... nice!

Her head starts getting light. Her breathing, shallow. Her mind flashes back to that terrible Aunt-Myra thing back at the house in Doornfontein, and the air *inside* grows a little thinner.

Then the man says, “Well, I see you’re not ready to listen to reason. Maybe by tomorrow, you’ll be more receptive to hear what I have to say. “

Only when the door shuts, Leda re-emerges. She’s alone, as far as she can tell. Keeping her eyes on the spot beyond the flame where the door is, she gets dressed. She spends the night pacing her fire cell until she collapses and falls asleep in the centre of the fiery prison.

A night passes. Two. Then only does the man return. But this is not a movie. There’s no creepy composition announcing the arrival of the monster.

But when he arrives, Leda is sitting cross-legged in the middle of the flame prison. She had bandaged the wounded hand with the sleeve she’d ripped off her top. She’s consumed by the relentless throbbing, so she’s startled when he speaks.

“I take it you’re ready to listen to reason?” says Sabien, “I brought you some water.”

He turns a dial that shortens one of the flames, creating enough space to pass Leda a slim glass of water. Their fingers touch briefly, and repulsion quivers through her body. Those strange eyes meet hers for a moment.

“Why not just listen to our offer? It’ll be easier.”

His voice is low, raw, like it’s skimming the surface of a tar road. She looks closer. Something’s off. Even though his words are neatly shaped and expelled, there’s tension. Something’s not right with him.

“You’ll be working for some very rich people, very rich, motivated people ... and all you have to do is collect emo from the Strata. That’s all.”

Leda turns her back on him, turns in on herself and into the blinding-white pain that is her hand. *Hiss*. The flame shoots back in place.

The ritual continues. Sabien visits Leda every night, always with the same offer. Leda is feeling weak, defeated. Pissing in a bucket in a fire prison will do that to you. Her resolve had pretty much morphed into apathy.

Sabien didn’t seem to be doing great either. He was far from the easy-going coffee shop guy who had, ironically, made her feel normal again. It wasn’t only his frustration with her non-compliance. It was something else. She thought she recognised it: addiction. Perhaps even withdrawal.

The next time he comes, he pleads with her.

“Look, Leda, I need you. We can change the world. It’s not only about the drugs, or the business or the money. Those are just the stepping stones of this world. Those are just the rules of this world. But your world, your world’s a new frontier. The currency? Space and time itself. *That* is true power.”

Leda raises her head ever so slightly.

“And if we can unlock the other layers,” he continues, “we’ll own the world. Who knows what that would mean?”

Leda turns her face towards his words.

He speaks with the fervour of a possessed man. His face lit with passion. His oratory, confident. The timbre of his voice fills the room and the spaces within her body. She can’t help but wonder if he’s the mentor she’d been waiting for. The one with the answers? She has *wanted* for, *ached* for, someone to show her the way.

She nods and returns to her hand. But not before she says, “Maybe we’ll talk tomorrow”.

Ian Sabien steps up to the fire. He has to stop himself from grasping the straw she’d given him. “I hate seeing you in here, Leda. It hurts me. Come to me.”

When his plea is met with silence, he has no choice but to say, “tomorrow then”.

# CHAPTER 24

## I know things. I see things.

Where to go from here? Leda's not answering her phone. What the fuck. There's one place to go, one person to see, but of what use that'll be remains to be seen.

The older suburbs of Johannesburg have remained largely unchanged. So, with withered memories and some luck, he finds the block of flats without much difficulty. The place has seen better times, is wildly overgrown, in need of paint, but it still holds its charm in that boho-chic sort of way. Here is the postbox, now without paint. Here is the French-styled wrought iron gate, now with rust spots. And the bougainvillea, still beautiful, in its deep red burgundy.

The gate is locked with a slew of padlocks. On the other side of the intricate twirls, the courtyard continues the theme of nature-vs-man. Apart from the birds that have made their nests in corners of the courtyard, the place seems deserted. But civilization is no pushover, and Mel can see signs of it, so he decides to stick around.

It's not long before a lone figure shuffles up to the gate. His head is bowed, his gait laboured. He mumbles as if to his feet or to the pavement; from inside his coat, a rattling sound.

Mel recognizes his old friend. He shouldn't be surprised at the state of him, but he is. His decline had already started back in the day, the signs were all there, and when his injury put a stop to his Strata days, well... Mel himself could now attest that it will send you somewhat mad.

He steps from behind the bougainvillea bush in front of the man.

The man, known to the greater Johannesburg as Aerosol, stops and looks up at him. "Geezus," he says, "you look like shit, *domkop*."

The two men walk up the driveway to the block of flats. Aerosol, or Jimmy Swanepoel, or Nikola Tesla, rummages around in his pocket for a bunch of keys. One of the keys unlocks the complex, and Mel follows him into the courtyard. Here it is even more overgrown, Jimson weed competes with Wisteria, competes with climbing rose bushes. A tomato plant has pushed up through the paving, heavy-hung with ripe fruit.



Mel follows Jimmy to a door at a corner of the building. His key scratches clumsily in the lock before it swings open.

“Sit, sit. Coffee? Tea? Juice?”

“Tea would be nice.”

“I haven’t any.”

“Okay.”

“Did you come to take me to the Strata?”

“I just need to know some things.”

Jimmy nods his head stoically, “I know things. I see things. I watch.”

“Like what?”

“Like the fear factory. I know where it is.”

“And *him*? Does he ever go there?”

“You mean the Goblin King? Macavity the Mystery Cat? He who shall not be named?”

“Yup, Ian Sabien.”

“No.”

Mel’s heart sinks. How now? What to do?

“But,” says Jimmy, “I know where he lives ... And I happen to know there’s some big hoo-ha happening there tonight.”

“Jimmy, you beauty!” Mel says and embraces the dirty man.

“Oh, get off me, *domkop*,” Jimmy scoffs, “and finish your goddamn tea.”

Leda had spent the night thinking. Sabien’s words had given her a strange sense of hope. But not in the way he’d thought it would. Sure, she’s in a prison of fire, but she’s come to the realisation that no matter what they do, she has the Strata, however inaccessible for now? and they don’t.

She thought about Jeremy. To him, the Strata was a curse. A black hole that takes and takes and takes. She thought of Mel. He thought the Strata was a burden, a neglected duty. A deconstruction machine for which he’d never received the manual. And she thought about Will. To him, the Strata was a place of wonder. A playground. And to the fat woman, her nemesis, it was power.

What she doesn’t know is what it is to her. Maybe it’s a place for changing things. She doesn’t *know* this to be true, but she’s keen to find out.

The disposition of the man who visits her late that afternoon is worse than before. He's anxious, wringing his hands and tapping his palm to his forehead as if trying to dislodge something. It looks like he hasn't slept in days.

So, when he scuttles up to the fire prison, his hands wringing nervously, he meets an implacable? Leda waiting for him at the flames.

But then she softens her tone and says, "I have an answer for you. I -"

Just then, someone enters the warehouse. Unhurried, heavy footsteps echo through the vast space for what feels like an eternity. There is an exchange of words. Leda strains to hear, to see through the bars of flame. She registers the swish of a florally patterned skirt. A blouse made of crimplene. A flash of hard grey hair. And she knows, without looking down, that the outfit ends in a pair of Crocs. Cathy McKinnes.

"McKinnes!" she yells, enraged beside herself. Frantically she launches forward only to jump back with a howl of pain at where a flame had seared her cheek.

"Careful now," says the man as if speaking to a child, "we need you intact. Healthy."

Leda can now clearly see one of the old woman's eyes through the flames. She looks back at Leda dispassionately, unmoved.

Clutching at the agonising wound, Leda hisses, "I'm gonna find you, you old bag. I'm gonna find you and I'm gonna hurt you."

At this, the old woman gives a step closer. She doesn't speak, just smiles.

"That's enough, ladies," says Sabien.

Still smirking, McKinnes turns on her heel and starts to leave.

"It was me!" Leda yells after her, "I set Morning free. It was me!"

And Leda feels a bit of satisfaction as the woman pauses, if only for a beat, before storming out of the room without looking back.

Sabien returns his attention to Leda, but even he knows the mood has shifted.

"You are hurting those people ..." Leda snarls so frustratedly she can hardly think.

"Broken people, most of them," he shrugs, "we've given them purpose ... a role, you can say. They are more valuable now than they've ever been. Will be."

Leda's anger propels her forward but she's met by the hot wall of fire again.

"I will kill you!"

Her anger is returned with an outburst of his own. His too propels himself closer to the fire.

“YOU will do as I say,” he says.

Through the flames, they glare at one another. His one pale eye locked in her green one. Suddenly he turns away, “all in good time,” he says, “all in good time. If you’ll excuse me, I have a charity event to get ready for.”

On the other side of Joburg, the party for said event is filling up. It is one of those elegant affairs that quickly becomes inelegant under the glint of crystal chandeliers and the influence of free booze. The cause - whales, HPV or whatever - is far less important than being seen having *mini tartes flambées* with the rich and famous.

Like the Grimms’ wolf, Mel’s stomach feels heavy with rocks. He adjusts his red nose. Most of the entertainers for the event have been vetted and granted access through the back entrance of the house. And here he stands among the throng of cocktail dresses and designer smiles, trying to con his way in.

The caricature of a movie screen hitman looks him up and down with an amused expression.

“You know this isn’t a costume party, right?”

“I was just a little late, that’s all,” he says, kicking at a stone with his oversized shoes.

“Is that right?” says the guy, “you should’ve checked in an hour ago, your fellow freaks are all here already.”

“I know, says Mel and starts rambling off a sob story about faulty clutches and difficult wives.

“Come, come, buddy, the actual guests are waiting, “says the man, tapping the tablet in his hand with a finger from the other.

Beyond the gates, Mel sees a cluster of girls dressed in the burlesque uniform of corsets and stockings. His voice carries just far enough to make the girls look up.

“I’m with them,” he says and waves.

They wave back.

“The old-timey strippers?”

“Uh, more Vaudeville really ... every Vaudeville act needs a clown you know.”

The man glances back at the girls, who are still peering at Mel inquisitively.

“I don’t know, buddy ...” he says, not entirely convinced, “well, show me a trick or something?”

Without breaking eye contact, Mel slips a balloon from his pocket, brings it to his lips and blows. Behold the Urian long-nosed monkey.

# CHAPTER 25

## They come at night

Sabien's fingers fold around the vial in his pocket. The glass is still warm, and he draws it into his palm once again. But then lets it slip back into the dark recess. With Delia gone, best be frugal. Instead, he rearranges his cuffs and continues doing so to distract himself from the cravings.

In the meantime, the world is unbearably grey and brittle. Filth gathers in every corner. His tongue is wrapped in thick plastic. Under his skin, thousands of centipedes carry away grey and white matter to devour it in dark holes. Or at least that's how it feels. Of course, it's just the dopamine seeping out of his brain, but it sure feels like he's losing his mind from where he's sitting. And these lows are fine and dandy to ride out when you're some teenage punk who has nothing to do but deconstruct the patriarchy or subvert gender norms or whatever it is the kids are learning these days. But he's got shit to do.

They'd found the girl, that was easy enough. But what use is that if she can just slip into the Strata the moment her Spidey-senses starts to tingle and there's no Delia to rein in the runaway? So, he had no choice but to summon them. The big guns. Sabien suppresses a shudder. He gathers himself as best he can, breathes deeply, tries to tune out the predatory arthropods in his head, and walks into his office to greet his imposing guests.

Mel stands in the lion's den. The place is filled with little black dresses and Calvin Klein cheekbones swigging drinks in exaggerated glasses. He stands out like, well, a clown at a black-tie affair. But he weaves his way through the partygoers single-mindedly, focused. He looks for that familiar face peeping from beneath its scraggly fringe but it's wall-to-wall glossy bob.

"Hey, Pennywise!" says one reveller, already in a state of spilling champagne, "do something funny!" He wants to ignore her, but many eyes had turned to him. He sighs, "one Urian long-nosed monkey coming up!" he says through a clenched-teeth smile. Swiftly he twists a balloon into a shape and presents it to the woman. She stares at it in her hand for a moment, then her eyes light up, and she squeals with delight. He slips away amidst the

whoops of laughter and beelines for the opposite side of the hall. He must admit, it's nice to have his work appreciated. On the other side, he finds some refuge behind the makeshift bandstand among the performers. To the left of him, the burlesque troupe is rehearsing their steps offstage.

It gives him a bit of time to survey the surroundings - from the tremendous chandeliers to the exits, most of which lead out into a heavily mooned night. Finally, he spots a staircase to one side, towards the kitchen. It's inconspicuous enough that he can just slip up there unnoticed. He does so swiftly and confidently so that it seems that he belongs.

On the second storey, the carpet is soft under his feet, his tread inaudible. Every inch of wall is covered by the iconography of the Holy Mother Mary, the frames so close together that they touch in places. Silently they watch his progress down the passage, the *Madonna Enthroned*, the *Madonna of Humility*, the *Madonna with the long neck*. Some of them are exquisitely crafted by an expert hand, draped in lapis-lazuli, ochre and cinnabar so translucent the light seems to emanate from them. Others are museum merchandise and others little more than roadside greeting cards for the hopeless traveller. *Madonna in the rose garden*, *Our mother of perpetual help*, *Virgin and Child with angels and saints*. Their faces are serene, their rosebud mouths ruby red. *The Black Madonna*, the *Roadside Madonna*.

He takes a left turn into a darkened corridor. Here too, Marys line the wall but their faces are dull ovals in the low light. He hurries towards the light from two convergent halls ahead.

A silhouette steps from the light, thin and tall, he hardly seems menacing. But Mel recognises him in an instant.

"Stetson," says Alexi.

"Alexi," Mel replies.

Alexi steps from the shadows, letting the light cascade over his face. He's grown older, Mel notices, the creases running from his nose have deepened, wrinkles run from his eyes to his jowl in folds that give his face a rubbery appearance. He's lost most of his hair.

"How have you been, Mel?"

"Oh, you know, rock-bottom and excavating."

Alexi gives a terse smile, "and the clown makeup? What's that all about?"

“Just a ruse to get in.”

The aide nods his head appreciatively. The two men stand silently opposite one another. Their shared history there but barely relevant to this moment.

“Well,” says Alexi after a few seconds, “shall we go?”

Mel sighs and nods his head. The gun wielded by a thug behind him digs into his back regardless. On the walls the Marys watch him being marched down the hall. Their oval faces, impassive. Their rosebud mouths, silent.

Through two flames, Leda can see that Sabien is dressed in a black tux; his tie, still undone, dangles loosely around his neck. Today he walks right up to the fire bars. Today the niceties have not made the journey.

“So, what will it be?” he barks, one eye glaring at her through the flames.

He wears the suit in that casual way he wears a T-shirt and jeans – the jacket is slightly too big, the trouser legs slightly too long. But on him, it looks like a fashion statement, the clothing equivalent of a carefully coiffed bedhead.

She’d spent the night thinking, and it had only fermented the thoughts she’d had before. It was time to change tactics, time to show the palms. But she can’t help herself and says snarkily: “Wow, who dressed you? Edna Mode?”

He tugs at the jacket with an agitation she hasn’t seen before and says, “I don’t get the reference.”

“Nothing flattering,” she assures him.

He makes a sound signifying frustration, then starts pacing up and down the length of her prison.

“Don’t test me today,” he hisses. And everything about him encourages her to believe him. He seems erratic. His words are rushed, bumping into each other like train carts on a faulty track. His miasma must be a roaring bright red fire, she imagines.

“Okay...” she says slowly. “What if I am ready to listen...”

Sabien pauses. Looks at her slowly. He closes his eyes for a second too long. He loves this part. It’s here where they take their last stand, their last futile act of resistance.

He stays on script: “Good girl. Good girl. I knew you would see it my way.”

She bites her tongue.

“So ... how would this ... work?” she asks.

“Time,” he says, “trust takes time.”

“You’ve won. I’m done fighting.”

His smile deepens.

“Of course, you are.”

Leda nods, her face the picture of compliance.

“Fine then!” says Sabien suddenly, “why not?” The fire columns hiss as he closes valves, cutting off the butane.

The flames are swallowed by the cement, and Leda is free to cross the series of nozzles without becoming crackling. He gestures for her to cross the boundary.

Leda stands frozen in the circle. *That’s it? Just like that? What game is this?*

She doesn’t trust this lunatic at all. The moment she steps over the fire nozzles, he’ll turn her into seared sturgeon.

“See it as a trust exercise,” says Sabien, his pale eyes not giving anything away.

Gingerly, her eyes still on Sabien’s, looking for the slightest hint of sadism, Leda steps across the barrier. The butane stays quiet, there is no fire lancing through her body. Only the lingering heat warming her face and body.

*Free!* It’s only Sabien standing there in the vast warehouse. Not even a guard in sight. Standing with his hands in his pockets, Sabien watches her with amusement.

“I must warn you -- “, he starts but Leda is already submerging. The cool blue floods in around her, and the world dissolves into endless white space. But she’d barely submerged when two pairs of hands grip her arms, anchoring her to the spot. She turns her head to the left, a cobalt blue face that seems to be cut from stone. She looks to the right, a lopsided grin and a shock of closely cropped luminous blue hair.

Sabien’s chuckle feels like blows from a clawhammer. “Ah! I’m sorry”, she hears his voice from beyond the Strata, “I should have told you ... meet Mr Legong and Mr Bruce ... they’ve both travelled very far to welcome you to our little family.”

They emerge into the world as the men force her to the surface again. Out here, where skin and touch are different, their fingers dig into her, hurting her. The grinning face has ice-blue eyes, out here, the cropped hair is startlingly white. His grin widens as she looks at him. She turns her head quickly.

Standing in front of Sabien like a drowned rat, defeat dripping off her in rivulets, she’s slowly coming to terms with the fact that there is no way out.



Sabien walks up to her. He bends down a little, cocks his head to look into her downturned face. “It seems trust is not quite an option yet. But don’t worry, you’ll learn. They always do.”

He tilts her chin up with one finger, smiles that everyman’s smile. “You remind me of her, you know. A bit wild. A bit scared. Just a fucked up mess of emotion.”

The throbbing in Leda’s hand is barely enough to hold her attention. She abandons trying to hide in her physical pain and seeks out her emotional ones instead. Sabien keeps droning: “But Jesus, could she travel. The best, if I had to say. It’s almost poetic, really. She may even have been able to go deeper than the first stratum. She stood there once where you are now ... not figuratively, of course, you know what I mean ... And she made the right decision. But then again, she would do anything to protect you.”

“Who?” Leda whispers softly. *Anna?*

“Well, Myra, of course. That crazy redhead.”

And Leda remembers.

The fight she’d had with her aunt had not been about a boy or school. It was about the cocktail of meds Myra had encouraged her to take.

“So?” Sabien says, “whadda you say we end this feud ... we’d both be much better served if we work together, won’t you say?”

Leda tastes bile in her mouth. The pain, now not a refuge but a launching pad. She has the sudden sensation of a hypnic jerk, the world opens up, and the bottom drops out. The blue world appears like a lava lamp, but it moves past her, through her, and then she is somewhere else, somewhere new.

Instead of blues, this place is made of grey, but it merely serves as a backdrop to a finely spun lattice that fills the air around her like fairy lights strung by an overzealous party decorator. Each gossamer strand glints as if with morning dew in sunlight. And everything is connected to everything. She raises her hand, from her fingertips the shiny lines sweep into multiple directions. Is this the loom of life, she wonders, our mortal coil? Or is it the twine that connects us all? Each to each other, each to everything, right through history and everyone that came before us?

With a quivering finger, she reaches out to touch one of the strings, and it disintegrates into a thousand twinkling particles. They swirl in the air for a moment, then neatly fall in line again as if they’ve never been disturbed.

“How -“ it’s not her voice.

The two men, they’re here with her. They’d long since let go of her arms and stand captivated by their new surroundings.

“Is this ...” mutters the shorter man.

“The next stratum,” says the other.

They turn to Leda, their faces nothing but shifting silhouettes made by the light.

“How did you do that?”

Leda starts wading through the strands, each one reassembling behind her as if untouched. She knows what this is. This is the way in which ideas, morality, the very spirit of the times, spread through a culture. This is the *Zeitgeist*.

“Man, is Sabien gonna *freak* when he hears of this!”

The sound of his name brings all three back to reality. Leda’s spine turns to ice-cold steel. She looks from one man to the other.

Electric-hair slowly shakes his head at her, his hand extended in a calming gesture, “Don’t, oh please no!” he says, “please don’t.”

The taller man says nothing. Maybe he gives a slight nod. But Leda doesn’t look at them again. She shuts her eyes ... the sensation of bubbles ... followed by the feel of the real world on her skin.

“Good God, don’t you ever give up!” Sabien says, annoyed, but stops short. He stares at the spaces on either side of her, expecting the two thugs to emerge from the Strata at any moment. But when they don’t, the panic is evident on his smooth face.

“Where are they?”

Leda says nothing, just moves towards him deliberately.

Sabien tries to retreat, his call for the guards caught in his throat. His feet tangle, and he falls to the ground.

“Where are they, where are they, where are ...they?” he repeats. The answer is so close, so loud, so evident, and he’s so close to seeing it ...

Leda looms over him.

“Where are they?” he whispers.

Leda reaches for the man on the ground. If he’s so obsessed with the Strata, then that’s where she’ll take him.

“Wait! Wait,” he says, “just wait.” He shakes his hair from his face, tries to gather himself a bit. “You’ve really been a pain in my ass, haven’t you, Leda? Jesus Christ, you’re a nightmare.” The laugh that follows sounds almost genuine.

“But it would seem we’ve come to yet another impasse,” he raises himself into the sitting position and gathers his knees to him.

“You talk too much,” she says and moves towards him again.

His hand goes up, “you may want to hear what your uncle has to say about it.”

Somewhere, far off in the distance, the highway goes about its business. The moon peering in on them looks rippled through the glass brick window.

“Mel?”

Ian Sabien smiles and smooths his hair back with both hands.

“Life has kicked old Mel’s ass, alright. I barely recognised him.”

“He’s here?”

“Yes, well, not here-here ... You never keep the keys to the vault on the premises, am I right?”

Leda watches helplessly as he stands up off the floor and dusts his tux off elaborately. He then scrounges around in his pocket and produces his mobile phone. He hands it to her. It’s cold in her hand, like a gun, like an instrument of death, like a blade, like a set of keys.

On the screen is Mel. He’d been badly beaten.

“He really looks worse for wear, doesn’t he?” says Sabien conversationally, “he used to be quite strapping, your uncle.”

“Where is he?” Leda’s voice is low.

“In an undisclosed location ....”

“I can kill you right now,” Leda says.

“Sure, but Dear Uncle has become quite dear to you, hasn’t he?” He nods his head in the phone’s direction.

“So, here’s the deal,” says Sabien suddenly in a no-nonsense tone. “You’ll be my new Delia. You’ll do what I say when I say it.

“And I think your first task on the job is to collect some emo dust.”

“Leda!” a tiny voice comes from the phone in her hand.

Sitting there, one gun in his ear, the other at his back, Mel feels there is a vivacity to the world that he hadn't felt in a while. As if the colours had an intensity he'd not quite noticed before, everything textured, everything goddamn beautiful. He had no idea whether Leda was there, whether she was watching, but he assumed Sabien would be using him as leverage round about now. Stetson turns his head until he faces the barrel head-on. And he knows what to do.

He takes a moment to turn back to the blinking light of the surveillance camera. Whether fate is granting him the audience he wishes for or whether he's speaking into the void, he doesn't care. It doesn't matter.

"Hey," he says, a smile spreading across his face, "you look like the show-me-where-he-touched-you-doll."

Leda's body shakes. Her uncle is looking straight into the camera, his face, a mess of blood and makeup and bruises. But he's smiling. And she knows that smile is for her. He says something into the camera. The sound is poor and far off, but she makes out the words, and it brings a quivering smile to her lips. Mels' shit-eating grin grows bigger. And she senses it before it happens. His hands chained to the table in front of him grab hold of a guard on either side and drag them into the Strata with him.

"No!" She yells at the deaf and blind TV, "No!" and launches towards the screen, but Mel is gone. And she knows, although she cannot see it, that somewhere on that grey floor lies a pacemaker.

Sabien's "no!" echoes hers, and he launches himself at the screen. He sees the end of it all – the money, the power, the girls, his life, knowing Corporate. From his seated position, he looks up at her. His lips mouth the word, *please*.

But Leda says nothing more as she clasps his face in both hands and takes him into the Strata with her. From this close up, those pale eyes just seem like weak coffee forgotten on the counter and getting cold.

## CHAPTER 26

### Smooth

Leda's hands are light on the wheel. She could've travelled the Strata if she wanted to, but she likes the driving. All the windows are open, the snowstorm is contained in a little glass dome on her dash.

She has a playlist on. They're new songs, randomly chosen by some benevolent AI. Like her emotions, some suck while others are pretty damn good. She hums into the wind.

There's a fedora and a Stetson on her passenger seat. She'd looked up the word for Mel's actions. It's *autothysis*. It means altruistic suicide. Even if she hadn't learnt the meaning of that word, she still wouldn't have liked the sound of it.

She glances back at the hats beside her. Maybe she'll find *them* in deeper layers of the Strata? Why not? It's clear we know nothing about anything. Perhaps she'll find the machine that operates time, doors that open up on other dimensions, maybe she'll find the architects of everything and learn how reality is made, and perhaps she'll even get to see beyond the vanishing point.

She takes her eyes off the road for a moment to find those of the man hogtied on her back seat. He gurgles something through the rag in his mouth, his eyes wild.

She smiles gently at Chris, Errol, or whatever his actual name is. She knows what he did. Who he is. But she also knows the heart wants what the heart wants. She doesn't know if this feeling is real or if it is something Delia had fiddled into being. But all she knows is that at this moment, here now, it feels very real. So, she figured she'll give it a chance to pan out. She smiles at him encouragingly.

The luxury coupe she'd lifted has all the creature comforts you could want. But the AC stays off. This is not the climate-controlled, weather-mapped, pressure-managed, oxygen-chambered life she thought she wanted. It's better. It's the real wind in her goddamn face. That is the organic smell of the world out there. Her miasma is still a mess. It hurts, and it feels good, and it sucks, and it's all over the place, and that's okay. She'd thought she wanted the polymer version of life – smooth-skinned, hairless, spotless, untainted and unused. But

when she'd looked into the perfectly symmetrical, perfectly rendered, untouched face of the world, all she was left with is the distinct chill of the uncanny valley.

No, she wants to feel everything. All of it. She wants to get involved, immerse herself in the messiness of other people. Of herself. And maybe this *is* just the same new beginning as always. But maybe that's all she needs, for she's found worlds beyond worlds beyond worlds, and it it's time to find herself.

THE END

.....

# MINI-DISSERTATION:

## **Antiheroes - characters we hate to love:**

a study of the deviant protagonist in  
Chuck Palahniuk's *Choke*

# CHAPTER 1

## Introduction

Lying, cheating, nihilistic, self-involved, and misanthropic, the protagonists in the writing of Chuck Palahniuk are often profoundly flawed to the point of being broken. However, despite their excessive human failings, these characters still manage to resonate with thousands of readers across the globe. This study will consider the construction of the protagonist and anti-hero, Victor Mancini, from the novel, *Choke* (2001), using a textual analysis approach. Palahniuk's protagonists make for interesting subjects as they manage to attract vitriol from detractors and the highest praise from fans. The paper endeavours to fill a vital gap in our understanding of the antihero's textual construction and his or her fantastical ability to connect with readers.

Mancini is a young and cynical, self-medicating medical school dropout whose words, thoughts and actions mirror his grim worldview. Among Victor's notable vices are his penchant for cruising sex-addict meetings for sexual encounters and faking choking in expensive restaurants to extort money from the good Samaritans who "save" him. Mancini is so marred and twisted that it is debatable whether he is a hero, anti- or otherwise, at all.

Of course, the notion of the antihero is not new. From Milton's fallen angel, Lucifer, to his modern-day incarnation as a dashing deviant club owner in the eponymously named television series, the antihero has been an archetype staple across the ages. However, scholars have noticed a remarkable uprise in the popularity of antiheroes in recent years, so much so that the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have been dubbed "the age of the antihero." Notable examples include lovelorn gangster Jay Gatsby (F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 1925); public enemy Tom Powers (J. Bright and K. Glasmon, *Beer and Blood*, 1931); crime don Michael Corleone (M. Puzo, *The Godfather*, 1968); symbol of teenage angst Holden Caulfield (J.D. Salinger, *Catcher in the Rye*, 1951) and Tyler Durden, the deviant but dashing menace from Palahniuk's cult novel *Fight Club* (1996).



Characters such as these present a sharp departure from classic heroes like King Arthur, Jason, leader of the Argonauts, or Superman. These classic heroes follow the law, champion morality, and avenge injustice. In contrast, this new breed of hero, or antihero, breaks the law, seeks revenge, holds petty grudges, and revels in a range of questionable vices. These dubious characters, who before existed on society's fringes, have become the blueprint for the literary protagonist.

One author who has become known for his degenerate yet beloved protagonists is Chuck Palahniuk. One example of such is his main character in the novel *Survivor* (1999), who spends his time trying to convince people who call his suicide helpline to kill themselves. Another is a porn star who intends to cap her legendary career by breaking a world record by fornicating with six hundred men (*Snuff*, 2008). With morally questionable characters like these in mind, the study turns to Palahniuk's work to glean some insight into the success of the antihero in modern literature. The writer's controversial themes – ranging from violence and the rejection of gender roles, to consumer culture, media saturation, and debauchery - have garnered much interest from scholars. More than garnering interest, Palahniuk has been a divisive figure since his novel *Fight Club* (2005), was made into a successful movie of the same name in 2007.

The contention lies not only in the transgressive themes of his work but in his very style of writing. For one, his writing is unapologetically sparse, fragmented, and punctuated by graphic, often disturbing, descriptions. Second, his unorthodox use of tenses, narrative perspectives, and temporal sequencing is as significant and inimitable as the characters themselves. Third, his narrators use an informal, conversational style that can switch unpredictably among first-, second-, and third-person narrative voices. Palahniuk's characters themselves suffer from the apprehension that their very identities are artificially constructed by language: an irony that readers know to be true. Moreover, this is precisely why Palahniuk's work is such an intriguing subject for a textual analysis that seeks to unlock the mystery of the antihero's success.

Hence, In this investigation, I posit that Palahniuk's unique literary choices contribute to the successful characterisation of less than heroic characters such as Victor Mancini. In the pursuit of understanding the antihero and how readers perceive him, I turn to the field of identification theory. The underlying premise of this theory suggests that readers are tirelessly evaluating the morality of a character's ideas and actions. If they agree with these ideas and actions, they are more likely to consider them just. This symbiosis fosters identification between reader and character.

This principle, however, fails to explain the antihero whose ideas and actions can rarely be considered moral or just. It stands to reason, therefore, that there are other factors at play that allow readers to suspend their sense of morality and perhaps even adopt the dubious ones of the character. Using the tools presented by identification theory, I seek to understand how identification between reader and antihero can occur *despite* a disjunct in moral worldview.

Furthermore, this study will contribute to the body of literature on Palahniuk's writing by focusing specifically on the linguistic construction of his protagonists. Examining the author's use of tenses, adjectives, point-of-view, direct and indirect speech, verbs of emotion, metaphoric expressions, and other literary devices may offer some insight into how identification is activated through the text itself.

In summary, the study intends to add value by garnering some understanding of the Palahniukian character as a linguistic subject and how he or she traverses the boundaries suggested by identification theory - more precisely, how these devices allow the antihero to resonate with readers. While the investigation takes cognisance of the world in which the text is constructed and differences in reader preferences, it is mainly concerned with finding answers to the antihero's success within the text itself.

## CHAPTER 2

### Locating the antihero

What are antiheroes, and how can they be recognised? Central to studies about the antihero and the genealogy of this ideation, is whether it is a *negation* of the archetypal hero ( i.e., villain) or a *variation* on the archetypal hero ( i.e., flawed hero).

In response to this question, researchers Ann-Christin Bolay and Andreas Schlüter, in their paper, "Antihero: the fascination" (2015), suggest, "the positive term does serve as a stable foil of reference for any negation because the sense is in no way lost through the negation but merely transformed" (5). Therefore, one can conclude that it is more beneficial to avoid thinking of the antihero as the "non-hero" but rather as another *form* of the hero when attempting to define the concept.

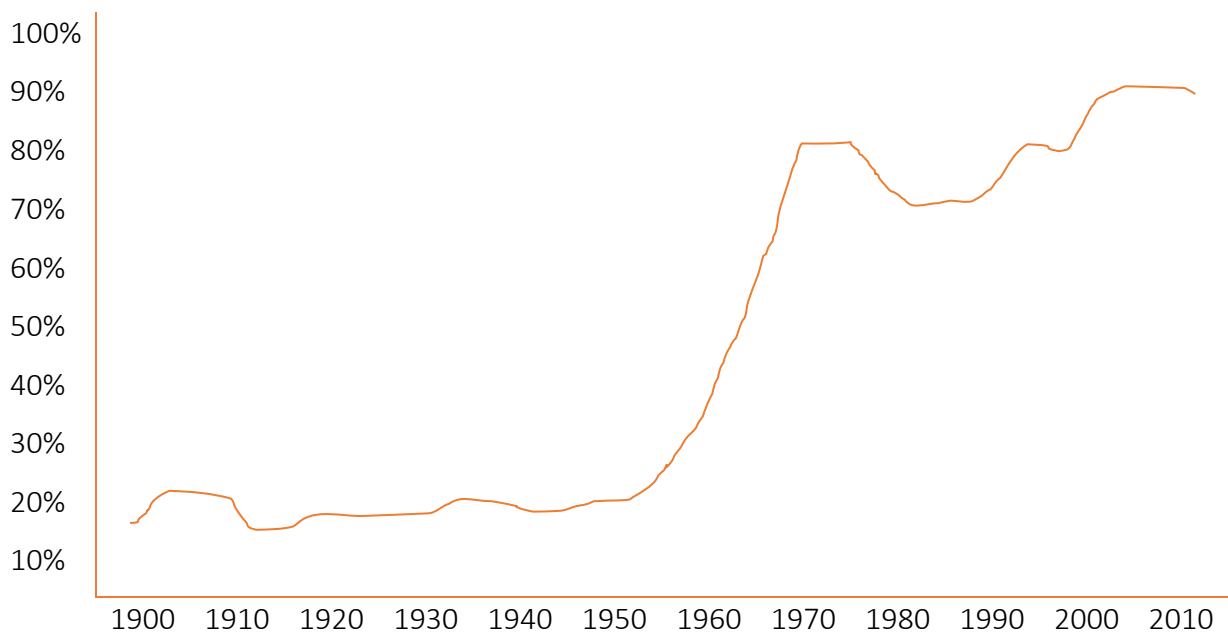
Researchers such as Bolay and Schlüter's (2015) efforts in defining the character centre on the word "fascination", a concept that has been linked to the notion of the hero since ancient times; in fact, they consider fascination to be a "fundamental element of a hero" (6).

"From the Ancient Greek *baskánein*, 'fascination,' means the 'evil eye' that captivates its target, bewitching and harming him but also able to positively win him over" (Janicke and Raney, 2015). In this sense of the word, the antihero can be comprehended as a character that has a magnetism that draws attention from? and evokes emotions without being directly understandable. Bolay and Schlüter further explain that therefore both hero and antihero "should be understood as exceptional beings at the centre of the narrative" (2015:2). However, there is a fundamental difference between evaluating the *deeds* of the antihero and those of the hero. Where the hero's deeds are accepted as moral and just, the antihero's deeds are subject to moral and ethical critique. Hence, *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (2000) defines an antihero as "a central character in a narrative or drama who lacks the admirable qualities of fortitude, courage, honesty, and decency that traditional heroes usually possess." This study takes on board this definition of the antihero but also expands it to include this additional description given by Bolay and Schlüter (2015) of him or

her as "a 'borderline figure' who makes the boundary between heroic and antiheroic qualities and behaviour fluid (6)."

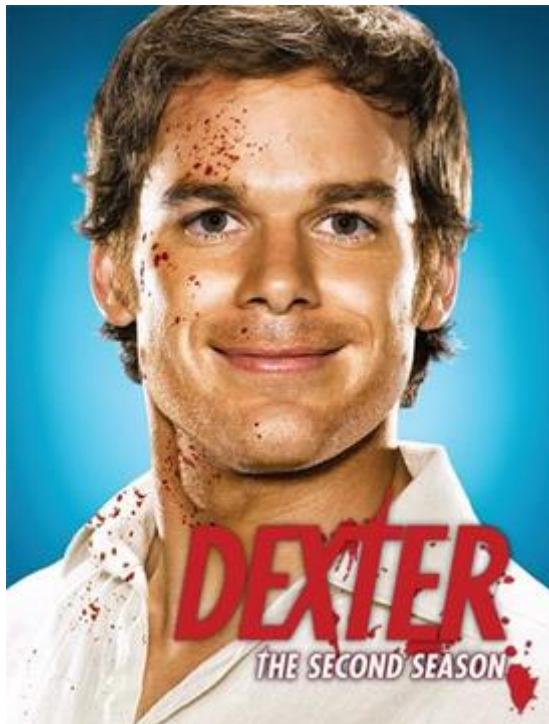
### Gaining popularity

The rise of the antihero can be observed quantitatively: Janicke and Rayney (2015) refer to Phillip Sarasin, who in 2012 searched over 5 million scanned books with over 500 billion words and determined that the term "antihero" was almost entirely non-existent in the corpora until the mid-20th century. The usage of the term then surged in the 1960s and has not shown signs of declining since.



**Figure 1:** The frequency of 'antihero/antihero' in Google's scanned books project from 1900 to 2010. Phillip Sarasin, 2012

This rising popularity is also observable at an anecdotal level. Today, television, film and literature have embraced the antihero and made him or her the heart of many narratives. In fact, the past decade has amplified the immoralities of these characters, leaving the "hero" part even more in doubt. Examples from popular media include the serial killer with "a code", Dexter (*Dexter*, 2006-2013), mafia capo Tony Soprano (*The Sopranos*, 1999-2007) and drug kingpin Walter White (*Breaking Bad*, 2008-2013).



**Image 1;** Cover art for *Dexter* (season 2), CBS Home Entertainment.

### Societal shifts and the underlying desire for transgression

Although the focus of this study is the textual construction of the antihero, his or her success is most likely a multidimensional phenomenon with many contributing factors. It would therefore be remiss not to consider some of the underlying factors that may play into the popularity of these characters. This is especially prudent since some scholars suggest that the antihero *is* a product of the times.

These scholars suggest that the rise of antiheroes in the public consciousness may well reflect the complexity of the modern world in which, one may argue, morality is becoming increasingly relativistic. This is important if one subscribes to this assertion made by Childs and Fowler: "the relation between characters and story shifts historically, often miming shifts in society such as the idea of individuality, self-determination, and the social order" (2006:13).

In her study of deviance and generational identities, Ana Sobral ascribes the antihero's appeal in modern-day society to "an inability, or unwillingness [on the part of...?], to fit into conventional roles and the antihero's rupture with society reinforces the image of artists as outsiders and confirms the possibility of leading a different life" (2012:62).

Jose Aparicio considers Palahniuk's protagonists in his 2008 article, "I want out of the labels: how Chuck Palahniuk's characters challenge the dominant discourse." He describes these characters as "social misfits and activists" and draws a parallel between them and literary rebels such as Holly Golightly (T. Capote, *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, 1958) and Neely O'Hara (J. Susann, *Valley of the Dolls*, 1966). According to Aparicio, "these characters deconstruct the natural attitudes society has towards identity, and they reveal that it is in some way possible to create a unique identity that is not easily definable by the ruling discourse" (2008:1).

Scholars such as Collado-Rodríguez, Aparicio and Sobral see a society searching for answers in unconventional places. They suggest that readers yearn for characters who defy conventions in a society fragmented by consumerism and unrealistic expectations. These characters are, in other words, about freeing the individual moulded by society to become an authentic self.

What then is this void that the antihero fills? One answer may well lie in the space between hero and antihero and the concept of "radical innocence", as Ihab Hassan (1961) explains. Where the classic hero's exaltation above ordinary society represents the "archetypal innocence of a Biblical Adam or noble savage", the antihero is "down in the trenches" and suffers entirely and utterly from the human condition (Hassan, 1961:362). It is essentially a search for authentic forms of being beyond the ideal or one-dimensional figure publicised by mass media and culture.

The antihero, therefore, stands in contrast to the traditional hero's clean-cut image. He or she represents exhaustion and even failure. Where the classic hero fights to maintain

norms and conventions, the antihero reflects those conventions as irrational or impractical. In a paper titled "Surviving American Culture: On Chuck Palahniuk", Eduardo Mendieta (2005) argues that:

Palahniuk's characters are testimonies to the resilient power of individuals to resist even the most invasive and persistent onslaughts by culture on the physic life of freedom and individuality (395).

Furthermore, their outsider qualities allow them to revolt and choose different ways of being. Ana Sobral takes this a step further by saying that the transgressive actions of the antihero make the text appear more authentic because, rather " than exploring fictional (and hence unreal) scenarios, the author produces a sort of roman-à-clef that re-enacts real experiences" (Sobral, 2012:62).



**Image 2:** Brad Pitt and Edward Norton in *Fight Club* (2005). Photograph by 20th Century Fox.

Another way to understand the antihero is to consider him or her as a symbol. In his study on..., Gerald Mead (1990) suggests that antiheroes are not necessarily realistic portrayals of individuals, but rather "more or less credible illustrations or exempla of a social, cultural, or philosophic period or condition" (14).

Feeding into Carl Jung's original theory of characters and universal consciousness, Mead explains that "[what] we understand and recognise in antiheroes, the reason we find them convincing and comprehensible, is that they represent social or ideological types. They reflect or are familiar images and myths of cultural codes" (1990:16).

By way of example, Mead points to the work of writers such as Honoré de Balzac, whose characters represent "the last great struggle against the capitalist ruin of man"; as well as Franz Kafka, Samuel Beckett and Albert Camus, whose works represent "modern alienated man, stumbling through a world without value or meaning and where even language refuses to function" (Meade, 1990:17).

It stands to reason, therefore, that the antihero may well be the hero needed in today's modern society. However, this then begs the question: with this compelling undercurrent driving society's desire for an antihero, how does one explain the divisiveness of antiheroes?

### Individual differences in morality

While some call Palahniuk the "master of irony" (L. Hannigan, *Newsday*, 2015) who is "utterly original" (M. Khun, *The Guardian*, 2010) and the "Don DeLillo of our time" (P. Junior, *Seattle Times*, 2011), others dismiss his fiction outright. Laura Miller, a critic for *Salon Magazine*, writes that Palahniuk traffics "in the half-baked nihilism of a stoned high school student who has just discovered Nietzsche" and that his writing is "repetitive", "bombastic" and full of "hopped-up imperatives and posturing one-liners" (2003). *Medium* reviewer Mike Sturm writes this about Palahniuk's most famous work, *Fight Club*: "It is not difficult to find scathing, but well-thought-out, reviews of the book and film. It is also not difficult to find reviews praising it as a masterwork of cultural criticism. Unfortunately, like so many works of art, it has been as divisive as it was impactful."

With these opposing views in mind, the question remains: how is it possible for people who are subjected to the same undercurrents in society to have such conflicting feelings about these deviant characters? To account for these differences in reader preference, the study turns, once again, to the field of identity theory.



For the past four decades, identity theory has guided academic investigations into the process of literary enjoyment. Researchers in this field suggests that positive evaluations of the protagonist's moral foundation are central to a reader's enjoyment.

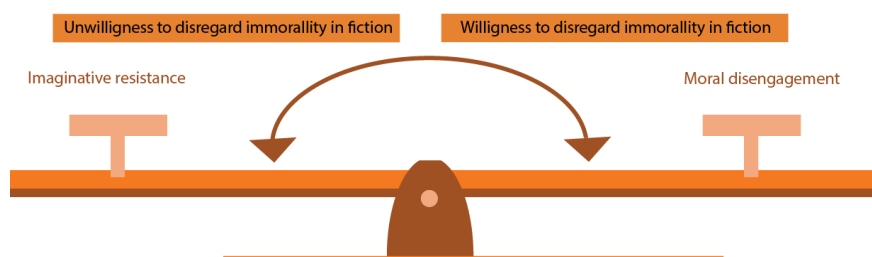
This idea is explored and developed in the integrated model of enjoyment offered by Raney and Bryant (2002). They argue that "[a] reader's emotional reactions toward literary characters' behaviours, motivations, and emotional responses are a function of affective and moral judgmental processes" (5). Zillman agrees with this assertion, saying that "with the typical hero narratives, protagonists are loved more as their behaviours and motivations are judged to be morally right and good, while villains are despised relative to how immoral and evil their works are judged to be" (Zillmann, 2000: 32).

These writers' conclusion, though, seems to stand as an argument *against* the acceptance, and indeed rising popularity, of the antihero. If one pursues this logic, it stands to reason that antiheroes are to be rejected outright as their moral shortcomings will repel readers. Alternatively, certain readers themselves are morally corrupt, and that is why they are willing to accept compromised morality. However, because the support antiheroes enjoy defies the first line of reasoning, and because it is improbable that millions of antihero fans are morally deficient, there must be a third option. And indeed, identification theory itself posits an answer.

Scholars in the field explain the phenomenon as? "imaginative resistance coupled with individual differences in morality" (Janicke and Rayney, 2015). Their research has shown that some individuals are particularly unable or unwilling to buy into fictional worlds in which immoral actions are presented as "the right thing to do." Such resistance may be taken function as a sort of "morality check" on fiction that prevents people from engaging with stories that require a suspension of their real-world morality.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, "moral disengagement" signals the *willingness* of individual readers to disregard morally ambiguous actions when they occur in a fictional context. Janicke and Raney (2015) go on to explain that "because people choose the fictions they engage with, any effect of narrative exposure is going to depend on their prior experience, attitudes, and beliefs that influence their choice of fictional texts." The more experience they have in a fictional world, the less likely they are to reject a character based on his or her immoral actions, hence allowing themselves to identify with that character.

Therefore, moral disengagement can be understood as the “process by which we alleviate cognitive and affective discomfort experienced when we or someone we like violates our moral standards” (Janicke and Raney, 2015:1). Several studies, similar to this one done by Janicke and Raney (2015), have concluded that moral disengagement helps a reader overcome the cognitive distress that should theoretically arise from liking a morally questionable character.



**Figure 2:** Imaginative resistance versus moral disengagement in the enjoyment of literary fiction.

This willingness or unwillingness to engage in what may be perceived as morally deviant fiction may well, to some degree, explain why some critics consider Palahniuk an essential literary voice and others are alienated by his transgressive style.

## CHAPTER 3

### Meet Chuck Palahniuk

In a biography on Palahniuk, Douglas Keesey and Linda Wagner-Martin tell how Charles Michael Palahniuk was born in Pasco, Washington, on February 21, 1962 (2016:1). The author first exploded onto the literary scene when his novel *Fight Club* was made into a movie in 1995. It featured major Hollywood star power, Brad Pitt, Edward Norton and Helena Bonham Carter, and garnered cult status, as well as controversy, owing to its disruptive and startling themes. Suddenly, the first-time author was famous and widely influential. The seven novellas which followed stayed this course.



**Image 3:** Chuck Palahniuk. Photograph: Leah Nash/*The Guardian*

As mentioned above, critics are divided about Palahniuk's writing, mainly since he tackles controversial themes in his novels. He aims at targets such as violence as a strategy against

consumerism (*Fight Club*, 1995; *Diary*, 2004), gender-bending (*Invisible Monsters*, 2018; *Snuff*, 2008), the pervasiveness of media and consumer culture (*Tell-All*, 2010) and religious and patriotic indoctrination (*Survivor*, 1991; *Pygmy*, 2009). In his latest work of fiction, *Adjustment Day* (2018), he tackles the complex nuances of identity politics.

Some notable studies of Palahniuk's work have located his fiction in some revealing contexts in recent years. Jeffrey Sartain sees Palahniuk as "continuing in the venerable tradition of social satire but with a more transgressive slant as he refuses to play moral arbiter" (2009:18). Eric Grayson considers Palahniuk's writing as "aggressive fiction" that "tramples reader sensibilities" and "offends and upsets willfully and deliberately, but with a satiric purpose" (2005: 54). Finally, Mendieta (2005) frames Palahniuk as "not the kind of writer who writes either to maintain a living or secure tenure. He is a writer with a mission, a vision, and a very distinctive style" (357).

As mentioned earlier, one aspect that makes Chuck Palahniuk's writing such intriguing source material for textual study is his unconventional writing style. Like the author's use of unconventional themes, the text itself becomes a symbol of innovation. In addition, several researchers have pointed out that the author's writing is characterised by a unique aesthetic that follows the tenets of minimalism, reminiscent of Hemmingway and Mailer. For example, Robert Clark (2015) explains literary minimalism as such:

The works within this tradition reflect several qualities. For example, the prose is "spare" and "clean," essential plot details are often omitted, and stories tend to be about 'ordinary people' instead of the rich and powerful.

Clark continues, saying that "[the] language in this type of fiction tends to be straightforward. Narrators do not often use ornate adjectives and rarely offer effusive descriptions .... Because authors use few words, each is invested with a heightened sense of interpretive significance."

"Spare" and "clean" certainly define Palahniuk's writing. His novels are propelled by a series of short scenes (Chapter three in *Choke* has fewer than 800 words), and it is not unusual to find one-sentence paragraphs. In *Choke*, on page three, for example, Palahniuk writes: "It'll be respected. Someday."

The writer has, in several interviews, expressed a deep-seated interest in the work of postmodern philosophers such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. It is, therefore, no

surprise that his writing is rife with pastiche and intertextuality, devices considered central to postmodernism both by its defenders and detractors. Linda Hutcheon explains how the use of pastiche and intertextuality is, for artists, like "rummaging through the image reserves of the past in such a way as to show the history of the representations their parody calls to our attention" (*The Politics of Postmodernism*, 1989: 93).

Palahniuk also almost gleefully employs metafiction, another staple of postmodernist fiction, across all his novels. As Dryer (2004) describes it, metafiction is essentially writing about "making the artificiality of art or the fictionality of fiction apparent to the reader [which] generally disregards the necessity for willing suspension of disbelief" (10). Sharma and Chaudhary (2011) explain that this strategy "is often employed to undermine the authority of the author, for unexpected narrative shifts, to advance a story uniquely, for emotional distance, or to comment on the act of storytelling" (95).

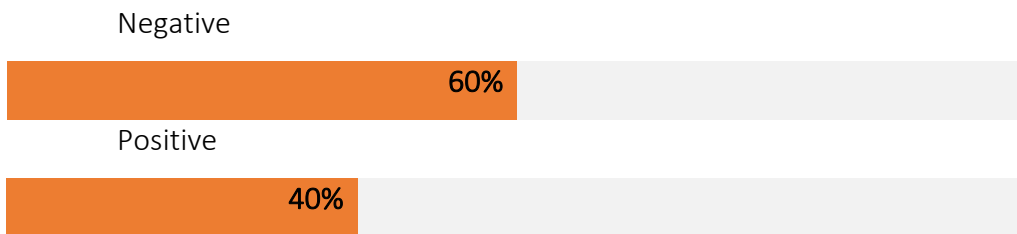
Even the way Palahniuk chooses to construct some of his sentences leaves some critics incensed. In a 2011 article in popular men's magazine *GQ*, Eric Sullivan compiled what he perceives to be the seven worst sentences in Palahniuk's novel *Damned* (2011). He refers to Palahniuk's writing as "phoned-in, half-baked drivel [that] reads like a deviant 7th grader's diary" (Sullivan, 2011).

However, Palahniuk's use of unorthodox sentence construction is not born out of ignorance or accident. The technique is called "burnt tongue," a purposeful mangling of phrasing and sentence structure to create awkward, stumbling phrases that are challenging to follow. The purpose behind this technique is discussed later on in this paper.

Whatever one's feelings are towards the author, one must recognise the dry sense of humour in his work. Keeseey and Wagner-Martin suggest, "the fact that his narrators and protagonists are not exempt from his satire may be another reason why critics label him a misanthrope" (2016).

### The novel: *Choke*

The novel under discussion in this dissertation is *Choke*, which was written in 2001 and is Palahniuk's fourth novel. The work returns to some topics and themes dealt with in *Fight Club*, and is described by Firstname Mendieta as a "Rabelaisian look at the culture that William Burroughs documented, from personal experience, in his classics *Naked Lunch* and *Junky*" (2005: page). Addiction lies at the heart of the story. It considers how an antidote to addiction may itself become the addiction. As Mendieta says, "the Faustian wager in this novel is, what if your cure is as addictive as your addiction?" (2005).



**Figure 3:** Sentiment analysis of *Choke*'s GoodRead.com review page (analysis by uClassify.com)



Naomi rated it ★★★★★

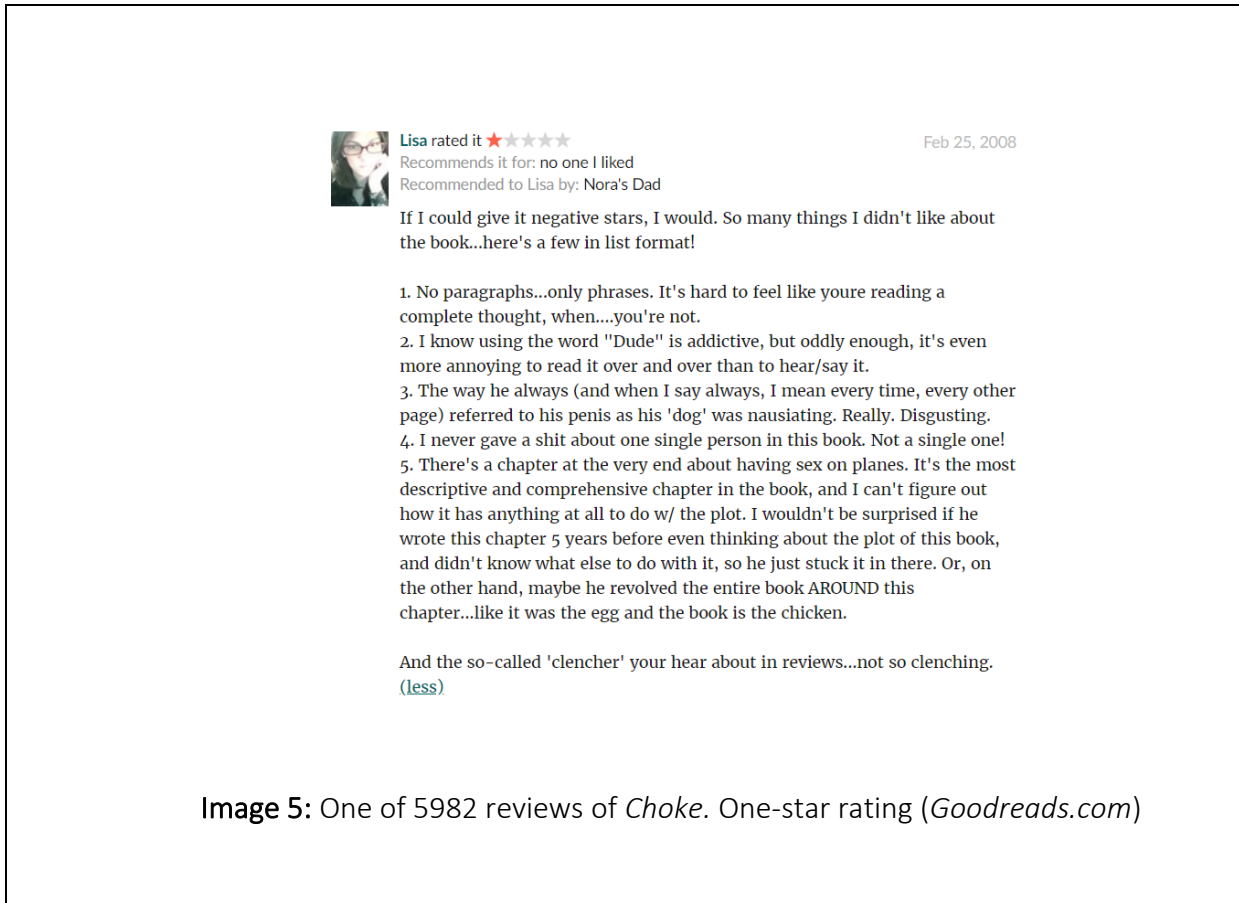
Feb 13, 2008

Recommends it for: those interested in personal growth

Once again, Palahniuk provides perfect social commentary. Essential to understanding America and ourselves, *Choke* invites you to consider your life holistically, question what you know, and examine the quotidian anew. In addition, Palahniuk challenges us to find the best of ourselves, to focus less on "Saint Me," and to experience fully those near-life experiences he documents so well in *Fight Club*. Another marvel, another marvel.

18 likes · Like · 2 comments · see review

**Image 4:** One of 5982 reviews of *Choke*. Five-star rating (Goodreads.com)



**Image 5:** One of 5982 reviews of *Choke*. One-star rating (*Goodreads.com*)

*Choke* tells the story of Victor Mancini, a nihilistic young man yearning for meaning but failing to find or even really *look* for it. Firtname Collado-Rodriguez describes Palahniuk's Mancini as imbued with a "sense of indifference and indolence", his "actions inevitably reaching hyperparodic and grotesque levels" (2013).

One reviewer on *GoodReads.com*, Tom Robinson, wrote this about the characters in *Choke*: "From the opening scene to the climactic ending, the characters in this story start out unlikable and steadily worsen."

All of Mancini's relationships are complicated - from his desire to care for his sickly mother, who abused him when he was a child, to the strange protective co-dependence he has with his friend Denny. And then there is the enigmatic hospital worker, Paige Marshall, who seduces Mancini and has some secrets of her own.

Mancini's world is dark and depressing. The Kafkaesque-world of sex-addict support group, renaissance reenactment village and geriatric asylum he has manifested for himself is more horrific than the one he seeks to escape. His motivations, although often complex, are ultimately self-serving - or are they?

There has been a significant number of studies of the novel since its publication in 2001. Firstname Kavadlo, for example, puts forth an original reading of *Choke* and how it defines selfhood (*Fight Club*, *Invisible Monsters*, and *Choke*, 2013). In addition, he suggests that even though Palahniuk's works are hiding "in the closet of postmodern apocalypses and existential absurdities," they are, in fact, "old fashioned romances" (2013:22).

In "Anger, Anguish, and Art," a chapter in the same book, David Cowart provides an intertextual analysis of Palahniuk's work (*Fight Club*, *Invisible Monsters*, and *Choke*, 2013). He explores alienation and the postmodern concept of history, which purports that language does not reflect reality but *creates* it (2013).

In chapter 8 of *Fight Club*, *Invisible Monsters* and *Choke*, Nieves Pascual relies heavily on the work of Freud, suggesting that narcissism is Mancini's defence against parental absence and abuse. "Pornography", according to Pascual, "is Victor's mechanism to find the place where empowerment and the acceptance of powerlessness intersect" (98).

As the discussion in the next chapter will demonstrate, even Mancini's ultimate salvation is dubious when he concludes that the only true salvation lies in losing everything: even one's dignity and self-respect.

As a protagonist, Mancini certainly has more defects, more self-inflicted misery, and fewer ethical values than most. And even though in the first pages of the book the author explicitly warns the reader to stop reading the book - "If you're going to read this, don't bother" (*Choke*, 2001:1) - there is something in it that compels one to read on anyway. So, how does Chuck Palahniuk write Mancini to the very edge of despicable but then manages to bring him back enough for readers to care about?



**Image 6:** Sam Rockwell portrays Victor in the 2008 film adaptation of *Choke*. Photography from IMDB.



## CHAPTER 4

### A textual analysis: Man of many words

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#### *Choke* (2001)

Total words: 70,362

Unique word forms: 7,094

Vocabulary density: 0.101.

Average w/s: 11.5.

Lexical density: 51.94%

Number of sentences: 6263

Number of syllables: 92183

---

So, who is Victor Mancini? Moreover, how is he textually constructed?

“When one first encounters a character on a page, he or she is an enigma,” says Gerald Mead in the introduction to *The Representation of Fictional Characters*. “It is only once his or her uniqueness unfolds on the page and interacts with the environment that the character's coherence is revealed” (1990:1). Characters, in this view, become coherent because they consist of lexical items and rules. It makes them distinct and recognisable. As Mead further explains, “characters are, thus, distinguished by their degree of textual complexity” (3). And, the characters created by Chuck Palahniuk *are* unquestionably complex.

In *Fight Club, Invisible Monsters, and Choke* (2013), contributor Jesse Kavadlo suggests that “the sense of narrative deferral in the novel [*Choke*] and the character's impasse may well be constructed by stylistic aspects such as the writer's economical use of words” (380). This disruption of the conventions of style, structure, and form makes this search for meaning within the text itself worthwhile. As Ana Sobral says, “the rupture with dominant mores is often accompanied by a rupture in style” (2012:24).



The central hypothesis of the linguistic cues framework in question is:

“Identification with a narrative character is a multidimensional experience for which different dimensions are evoked by different linguistic cues.”

- van Krieken, Hoeken and Sanders, 2017:1

The different dimensions identified in the paper are the:

- spatiotemporal,
- perceptual,
- cognitive,
- moral,
- emotional,
- and embodied dimension.

I will consider the character of Mancini with reference to each of these dimensions and put the linguistic cues set out by the framework to the test.

NARRATIVE	LANGUAGE	READER
<b>Dimension of subject</b>	<b>Linguistic cues</b>	<b>Identification dimension</b>
Spatiotemporal	<b>Spatiotemporal viewpoint</b>	Spatiotemporal identification
	Grammatical choice/tenses/deixis	
Perceiving subject	<b>Perceptual viewpoint</b>	Perceptual identification
	Verbs of perception/bodily perceptions	
Cognitive subject	<b>Psychological viewpoint</b>	Psychological identification
	Verbs of cognition/ metaphoric expression	
	of mental state/thought reports	
Moral subject	<b>Moral viewpoint</b>	Moral identification
	Evaluations/ attributions	
Emotional subject	<b>Emotional viewpoint</b>	Emotional identification
	Verbs of emotion/adjectives of emotion/	
	metaphoric expression of emotional state	
Active subject	<b>Action/motion</b>	Embodied identification
	Action verbs	

**Diagram:** Adapted from diagram developed by van Krieken, Hoeken & Sanders (2017) illustrating the workings of their linguistic cues framework.

## The spatiotemporal dimension

**Proposition 1** of the linguistic cues framework: “Linguistic cues of a narrative character’s spatiotemporal viewpoint enhance the reader’s identification with that character.” - van Krieken, Hoeken & Sanders (2017)

According to van Krieken, Hoeken and Sanders (2017), spatiotemporal identification is the most fundamental dimension of identification. It is the process through which readers adopt the character's physical location in time and space to experience the story.

Pertinent questions to be asked when assessing this dimension include: do readers have privileged access to the perceptions, intentions, and goals of a character? What type of access do they have? Is it heavily mitigated through various lenses, or do we have direct access to Mancini's inner landscape? Is the metaphoric camera located *within* the grammatical object or the grammatical subject? I will also consider the linguistic signals such as grammatical choices, verb tense, and deictic elements that offer insights into the spatiotemporal dimension as it relates to the character.

Hoeken purports that “an author’s grammatical subject choice can affect a reader’s spatiotemporal identification as it allows him or her to experience the scene through the eyes of the character in subject position” (2007:90).

*Choke* is written from the vantage point of its main protagonist, Victor Mancini. He is a first-person narrator who relays his story in the present tense. So, when he is leading a group of children through the renaissance reenactment village where he works, the reader is right there in the moment and in the village: “Every half hour, I'm supposed to teach another herd of fourth-graders some shit nobody wants to learn, like how to start a fire. Instead of useful Pilgrim crap, I tell them how their playground game ring-around-a-rosy is based on the bubonic plague of 1665” (*Choke*, 2001:85).

From this locus, the reader shares in the disregard Mancini feels towards the children and his job. Readers have a straight line to Victor's thoughts and feelings,

which is often denied when he interacts within the novel. For example, while he is having an illicit encounter with a teacher at work, the reader gets a glimpse into the state of his frazzled mind: "To keep from triggering, I'm thinking of dead rats and rotten cabbage and pit toilets" (*Choke*, 2001:88).

Mancini is, therefore, an intradiegetic narrator, a narrator who relates his own experiences through his own filters. This type of narration allows readers inside the character's head and motivates them to adopt the character's point of view. The reader can now share in the discontent Mancini feels with his life and the deviant behaviour he embarks on to give expression to that discontent. According to Brunyé et al. (2009), deviance becomes an "externalised aim" - something that both the narrator and the reader yearn for but dread at the same time.

Let us consider another example from the text: "... and for sure she thought it would turn into something romantic, but hey. Me being face deep in her wonderful rubbery butt, it's amazing what a woman will read into if you by accident say, I love you" (*Choke*86). As the reader is privy to the thoughts in Mancini's head, it allows him or her to experience the scene *through* him and is likely to give readers a better understanding of his state of mind.

If the locus was situated within a third-person narrator, the scene might be interpreted much differently. Even though the propositional content may have been the same, an intimate understanding of Mancini's state-of-mind offers a glimpse into the complexities involved in the exchange. Had the story been told from a less egocentric reference point, the scene may have removed the reader from the truth that underlies the encounter.

Leech and Short (2007) posit that the "very exposure [...] to a character's point of view tends to establish identification with that character, and an alignment with his value picture" (221). Neuropsychological research shows that the "I" perspective is "evolutionary primal as it is processed in a different neurological way than third-person perspective" (Vogelely et al., 2004). It is therefore widely suggested that readers perceive the fictional world from the central narrative subject's point in time and space. Zwaan and Radvansky emphasise that "this is crucial in the reader's construction of the spatial layout, temporal order, people, objects, and goals" (1998:245). The readers find themselves in the character's shoes.

This finding is further illustrated in a study by Morrow et al. (1987), which shows that a reader's ability to remember the names of objects depends significantly on that object's proximity to the character in the narrative world, i.e., the closer that object is physically, emotionally, and mentally to the character, the more likely it is for the reader to recall it. These results indicate that readers align their mental representation of a story with the viewpoints of characters who play a part in it. "Spatiotemporal identification is therefore considered a default mode of identification" (van Krieken, Hoeken & Sanders, 2017:2).

Employing a grammatical subject to narrate his stories is a central technique used by Palahniuk to allow readers access to his characters. The self-referencing "I" is used 1407 times in *Choke*. He takes it further by letting Mancini speak directly to the reader, breaking the fourth wall of fictional discourse. The novel kicks off with Mancini rendering a warning directly to the reader: "If you're going to read this, don't bother. After a couple pages, you won't want to be here. So, forget it. Go away. Get out while you're still in one piece. Save yourself" (*Choke*, 2001:1). This approach is repeated throughout the novel. Mancini implicates the reader in the narration: "It feels bad, telling you all this. Spoiling the surprise, I mean. You'll see it all yourself, soon enough. That is if you live too long. Or if you just give up and go nuts ahead of schedule" (*Choke*, 2001:27). This self-referential technique typically reveals Mancini's misanthropic nature and sets a low bar of likability. However, the intimacy created by the point of view implicates the reader, fostering intimacy and identification. The use of pronouns is discussed later in this section.

### ***Tenses***

"Spatiotemporal identification might also be affected by the choices the author makes when deploying tenses" (van Krieken, Hoeken & Sanders, 2017). Most of Palahniuk's stories are written in the present tense, and *Choke* (2001) is no exception. The readers' relationship with Victor is immediate. They share in his joy, pain and fear at the very moment of its conception. This sense of urgency conveyed by a story told as it happens wraps the readers up in the moment and denies them the luxury of hindsight. Readers are caught in the same place and time as the protagonist.

“Compared to the past tense, the present tense decreases the temporal distance between character and reader, and so doing, virtually collapses the distance between character and reader” (Van Krieken et al., 2016).

On occasion, when recounting something that has happened in the past, Palahniuk reverts to past perfect. According to Firstname Dancygier (2012), “this use of past perfect decreases the temporal distance between character and reader, evoking a stronger suggestion of internal perspective than past simple.” Using past simple would imply that the situation has been dealt with, and resolved. So, instead, the author employs past perfect to illustrate how the past continues to influence the present and future. For example, “Denny had got up to the point where he needed to masturbate fifteen times a day just to break even. Anymore, he could barely make a fist, and he was worried about what all that petroleum jelly might do to him, long term. He'd considered changing to some lotion, but anything made to soften skin seemed to be counterproductive” (*Choke*, 2001:42). Denny’s masturbation problem may be in the past (or is it?), but the compounding effect continues.

One might infer that Palahniuk chooses past perfect as it is like the present perfect tense in that both started in the past. However, the *difference* is that the past perfect event also *ended* in the past. Instead of the time being *now*, the time is *before*. This confuses the sense of time, creates immediacy, and shows the past's lasting effect on people.

This disjunction is not the only unconventional tense shift that Palahniuk employs. The author’s first-person point of view and present tense style give way whenever the narrator shares memories from his childhood. In these instances, the story is told from a detached third-person point of view. It is relayed in the simple present tense and filled with deictics such as the word *now*. The reason behind this strategy is discussed in the following section.

### ***Deixis***

Another recognisable characteristic of Palahniuk's writing is his pronounced use of proximal deictics such as *here*, *this*, and *now* (*here* appears 552 times in the novel; *this* appears 425 and *now* appears 275 times). The sheer volume of these deictics and the time and place in which they occur are not coincidental. Rapaport et



al. (2013), among others, refer to these proximal deictics as "the narrative Here/Now' because they designate a spatial and temporal reference point from which the events are described and interpreted."

This use of proximal deictics is deployed on the very first page of *Choke* when the narrator says: "After a couple pages, you won't want to be here ..." (2001:1).

Another example from the novel is: "Right now, down the hall in Room 234 is the girlfriend of your best friend's cousin ..." (2001:13).

The use of deictical terms that are proximal as opposed to distal is important for identification as they determine the deictic centre of the narrative experience. It anchors the reader to a time and place; in this case, the centre is Mancini. Therefore, this fictional cousin's girlfriend is just down the hall from the reader as well. The implications of what Mancini is suggesting are made more real, imminent, and attainable.

Surprisingly, even analepses from Mancini's childhood employ strong proximal deictic elements. "Now from behind him, the stupid kid hears the rattle of the Mommy shaking the spray paint, the marble inside the can knocking from end to end" (2001:4). This, according to van Krieken et al. (2017), is likely to result in more robust identification than the use of distal deictics (there, that, then).

Therefore, it can be concluded that the textual construction of Mancini adheres to the spatiotemporal imperatives that foster identification with the reader. With Mancini as a grammatical subject, some reader's spatiotemporal identification is affected as they view the world directly through his eyes. So, too, the use of present and past perfect tense collapses the distance between reader and character, and the prolific use of proximal deictics reinforces this closeness.

### The perceptual identification dimension

**Proposition 2** of linguistic cues framework: “Linguistic cues of a narrative character’s perceptual viewpoint enhance the reader’s perceptual identification with that character.”-van Krieken, Hoeken & Sanders (2017)

Large parts of the events in storytelling are processed through the auditory, visual, and tactile perceptions of characters. Perceptual identification refers to the process in which readers adopt these perceptual perspectives. This dimension considers what Mancini sees, hears, and physically experiences – his perceptions and sensations. If the reader is allowed explicit access to Mancini's experiences – for example, through verbs of bodily sensation or perception - it may well promote a certain degree of perceptual identification with the character.

### *Verbs of perception*

Palahniuk is well known for his visceral approach to writing. His characters' experiences are often described in sensory detail, while overt statements about their motives or feelings are largely avoided. Instead, he often adopts a vague tone about profound occurrences but describes less relevant bodily experiences in agonising detail.

So too, in *Choke*, the reader is often privy to Mancini's bodily sensations. "My lips crack, trying to get around the chunk of steak, the meat salty and juicy with fat and crushed pepper" (24); "The taste of blood pools around the base of my tongue" (145); "the taste in my mouth is acid" (229).

Palahniuk's verbs of perception always work hard to convey more than what is within the protagonist's earshot or field of vision. They create a mood, reflect a truth or a feeling: "All you can hear is the rain, water falling against puddles, against thatched roofs, against us, erosion" (*Choke*, 2001:33). This sentence is not so much about the rain that Mancini can hear and see as it is about the hopelessness, the powerlessness, which he experiences and what it symbolises

So too, because Mancini is an unreliable first-person narrator, the verbs of perception are imbued with layers of meaning. Mancini sometimes equates some sensory experiences with emotional ones. For example, the unbearable sensory

experience of choking becomes an act of love. Palahniuk describes a scene in which Mancini almost chokes on a corndog as a little boy:

Then two arms were hugging him from behind, lifting him off his feet, and the Mommy whispered, 'Breathe! Breathe, damn it!' After that, the kid was crying, and the entire restaurant crowded around. At that moment, it seemed the whole world cared what happened to him. All those people were hugging him and petting his hair. Everybody asked if he was okay. It seemed that moment would last forever. That you had to risk your life to get love (*Choke*, 2001:7).

The little boy equates the feel of the arms performing the Heimlich manoeuvre to a hug; he mistakes the relief expressed by the bystanders for love. This experience triggers Mancini's swindle in which he pretends to choke in restaurants to extort money from his 'saviours'. However, it becomes evident that the con is about more than the money: it is about recreating the experience he had as a boy, which made him feel loved. Further, consider this paragraph from the novel that uses the perceptual verb 'feel':

I cross my arms behind my head. For the next I don't know how long, I've got no problems in the world. No mother. No medical bills. No shitty museum job. No jerk-off best friend. Nothing. I feel nothing (*Choke*, 2001:34).

"To feel nothing" is Mancini's goal. The fact that he is busy engaging in a sexual act at that moment complicates this admission even more. If anything, the activity should be making him feel *something*. Instead, it communicates the emptiness of the act, his longing for oblivion and the bleak sense he carries of the world.

As mentioned, Palahniuk's descriptions of bodily perceptions are often grotesque, always vivid. One of the main criticisms of his work is his refusal to shy away from the revolting and the disturbing. Take, for example, this excerpt in which Palahniuk describes the aftermath of a sexual encounter between Mancini and a woman from his sex addict group: "My ass hurts so much, I finger around back there and then check my fingers for blood" (*Choke*, 2001:29).

Therefore, it is not surprising that some critics label Palahniuk as "someone who revels in the gross" (Tim Adams, *the guardian.com*, 2001). A contributor to *USA*

*Today* describes him as "turning out indiscriminately spewed nastiness" (2015), while Tom Shone from the *New York Times* says that his "themes range . . . from the queasily gynaecological to the queasily gastrointestinal" (2005) and that "every five pages or so the author will describe something foul."

In response to these criticisms, Keesey and Wagner-Martins (2016) ponder whether Palahniuk's emphasis on the physical could serve some purpose beyond mere sensationalism. They believe that "[Palahniuk's] visceral depictions of sex and violence have social, psychological, and religious significance" (Keesey and Wagner-Martin, 2016). indeed, it does seem to have a purpose in service of the work.

To write bodily sensations vividly is a technique called 'going on the body' and is employed and taught by Tom Spanbauer, an author whom Palahniuk greatly admires.

When the author describes a character's experiences in overtly physical terms, the reader is moved to "feel what the character feels and thus form an even closer identification with him or her," said Palahniuk in a 2005 interview with *The Book Show*. "That's why all my stories tend to involve sex, or violence, or drugs, or illness, or accidents."

Proponents of Palahniuk, such as Keesey and Wagner-Martins (2016), posit another theory regarding the writer's penchant for writing the grotesque. "The vivid descriptions of the carnal and the vulgar are a satiric attack on social norms" (Keesey and Wagner-Martins, 2016). The reader is not spared the experience of how Victor's colon becomes impacted from a left-behind anal bead which eventually causes him to evacuate his bowels in public: "My bowels burst loose down my pant leg with the two rubber balls and all the shit piled up behind them" (*Choke*, 2001:83).

This type of visceral, stomach-turning and disruptive corporeality upsets society's conventions. As Mookerjee (2013) describes it, "it is carnal imagery as a reminder of visceral reality" (82). She further suggests that readers harbouring "revolutionary sentiments might identify with the chaotic set of values and welcome the horrible [grotesque body] if it meant destroying some aspect of the decorous world" (Mookerjee, 2013:89).

This theory put forward by researchers such as Keesey and Wagner-Martins (2016) and Mookerjee (2013) certainly rings true. It may well be that the monstrous

bodies, disfigurements, and bodily malfunctions in Palahniuk's work are the externalised manifestation of the individual's rage and suffering. Rather than hinting at the grotesque or using euphemisms, Palahniuk implores readers to feel an almost physical empathy for the traumatising experiences Mancini endures.

This philosophy also dabbles in the realm of what psychologists call 'evasive pleasures'. Michal Minárik (2011) explains how 'evasive pleasures' are the "offensive pleasures that occur at the moment of breakdown of culture into nature" (2). It is a loss of the socially constructed self and the giving over to our natural selves. "These forms of pleasure are primarily related to the body, and they socially tend to cause offence and scandal" (Minárik, 2011).

In *Choke*, Mancini indulges in many such evasive pleasures. Perhaps the most poignant example is when he sees a video of an overweight, naked man bending over in order for a trained monkey to insert chestnuts into his rectum. Instead of being disgusted or repulsed, Mancini views this as the ultimate act of freedom – no inhibitions, no shame, nothing to lose. He muses on the significance of this moment, saying that

[t]he point was, it's not the sex part of pornography that hooked the stupid little boy. It was the confidence. The courage. The complete lack of shame. The comfort and genuine honesty. The up-front-ness of being able just to stand there and tell the world: Yeah, this is how I chose to spend a free afternoon. Posing here with a monkey putting chestnuts up my ass. And I really don't care how I look. Or what you think. So, deal with it. He was assaulting the world by assaulting himself (*Choke*, 2001:12).

This act of degradation and humiliation becomes a metaphor for Mancini throughout the novel: "My bowels burst loose down my pant leg with the two rubber balls and all the shit piled up behind them. My entire private life made public. Nothing left to hide. The monkey and the chestnuts" (*Choke*, 2001:83).

By allowing his characters to immerse themselves in these 'evasive pleasures', Palahniuk allows the reader the experience by proxy — without shame or judgement. It brings him or her face to face with the darker, more puzzling side of human nature.

Francisco Collado-Rodríguez notices that "the trauma and pain that Palahniuk's protagonists willingly inflict on themselves are understood as a necessary ritual of passage to rid themselves of their previous identities" (2013). Once they have

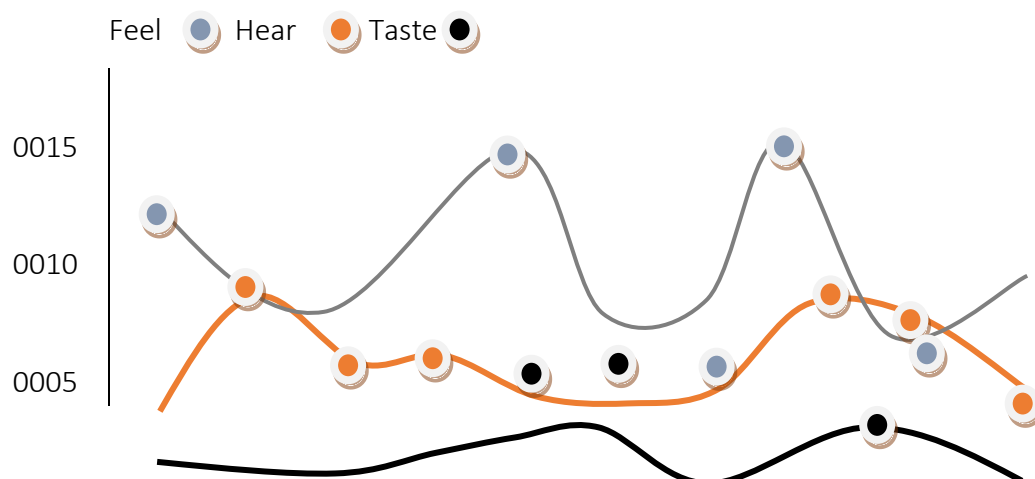
suffered through their “transformations”, Palahniuk's grotesque characters with their explicit humanness are now no longer symbolic of fear or hatred. “The monstrous others become sites of identification, sympathy, desire, and self-recognition” (Mookerjee, 2013:92).

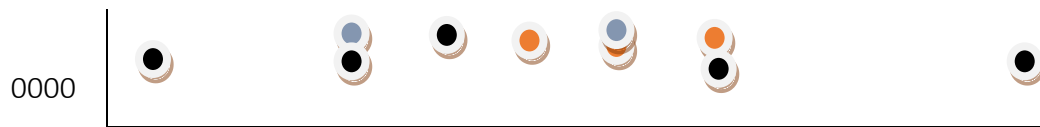
### *Verbs of perception*

Caenepeel (1989) describes “free indirect perception” as instances in which “a verb of perception is absent, and the sentence represents an observable state rather than an action or event and might therefore be interpreted as something being directly perceived by the character” (24). Thus, it can be understood that not all perception requires a verb to foster identification and that there are instances of free indirect perception which feed into perceptual identification.

The idea of “show don't tell” has become a maxim for every aspirant writer, and Palahniuk is a staunch follower of this principle. As a result, much of the text in *Choke* is written as indirect perception. Take this excerpt: "The people all around us, eating in their dressy clothes. With the candles and the crystal. With all the extra speciality forks" (2001:54). Instead of prefacing the scene with ‘look at all the people around us’, Palahniuk chooses to relay the sensation of seeing *indirectly*, without prefacing it with a sense verb.

In the following example from *Choke*, he uses sensory signifiers to communicate how cold little Victor feels at that moment instead of using the sensory verb 'feel'. He writes: "His [Victor's] little stool-pigeon chest is all dimpled chicken skin. His nipples are pinched up by the cold into hard red pimples ..." (2).





**Figure 5:** Relative Frequencies. Prevalence of sensory verbs ‘feels’, ‘hears’ and ‘tastes’ as they appear in the novel.

It is the position of the writers of the framework that free indirect perception fosters less identification than direct perception. “We expect identification to be the strongest in instances of direct perception because of their explicit reference to the character’s sensations and perceptions” (van Krieken, Hoeken & Sanders (2017). Although their position on the matter seems plausible, I am doubtful of its veracity. Therefore, I assert that free indirect perception has the potential to secure the *most* identification – at least in Palahniuk’s writing.

There are many instances of free indirect perception in *Choke*. Much of the information that might be interpreted as something being directly perceived by Mancini lacks a verb of perception and quotation marks. Take, for example, these sentences on page three of *Choke*: “So if you think this is going to save you . . . If you think anything is going to save you . . . Please consider this your final warning.” Palahniuk switches directly from recounting a childhood memory to addressing the reader. The change is not prefaced in any way, and quotation marks are absent, yet he is still clearly addressing the reader directly.

He, of course, takes free indirect perception even further by inserting the reader *into* the body (“you”) of Mancini when he does make a direct perceptual observation. “Fluorescent lights flicker and reflected in the chrome pipes under each sink you can see Nico's throat is one long straight tube, her head thrown back, eyes closed, her breath panting out at the ceiling” (*Choke*, 2001:6). While it is Mancini experiencing the act of seeing the sight, Palahniuk superimposes the reader onto Mancini by using the nominative “you.” The nominative case marks the subject of the active verb. The reader becomes the 'agent' engaging in the action. Mancini is now speaking directly to the readers, imploring them to see through his eyes. Palahniuk is putting them into Mancini’s shoes. A 2011 study by Brunyé et al. shows that readers

develop “richer spatial mental models of layouts and a greater internalisation of emotional events when directly addressed as a protagonist” (1). In the following example, he uses a verb of perception, not employing the mitigating ‘you’, yet blurring the boundaries between reader and character even further: “Feel the fog start to lift. Feel the sun bright and warm on your shoulders” (*Choke*, 2001: 22). As the lines between narrator and character become even more indistinct, it removes another layer separating the reader from the character.

In the case of *Choke*, the verb of perception ‘see’ requires special consideration. A quantitative analysis of the text reveals that Palahniuk employs it 153 times in the novel. “He deserves tuberculosis. See also: Hypothermia. See also: Typhoid fever” (2); “See also: The pool cue. See also: The teddy bear hamster” (4); “See also: Leukemia. See also: Pulmonary oedema” (11).

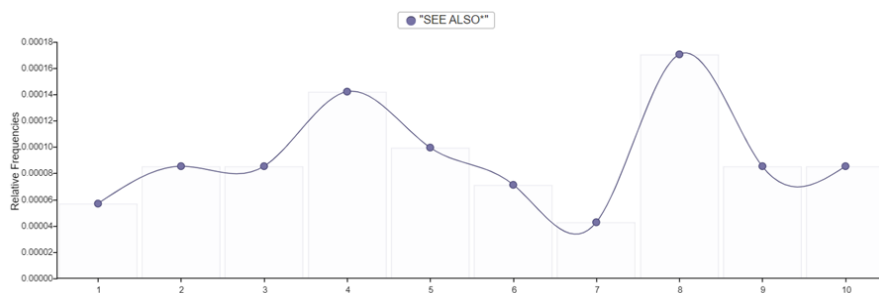


Figure 6: The use of the phrase ‘see also’ as distributed throughout the text.

The phrase *see also* is an opening signal that appears at the beginning of citation sentences. It is used to refer readers to other sources supporting a proposition when other sources have already been cited.

In *Choke*, every *see also* reference serves to transpose meaning onto the preceding statement – it either provides context for the statement or reveals another angle not evident at first glance.

This is another strategy adopted from Spanbauer, who calls these repetitions *horses*. A further example from Palahniuk’s body of work is the now-notorious rules of *Fight Club*: “The first rule of *Fight Club* is, no one talks about *Fight Club*” (1996).

Some believe that this technique performs a vital function. Linda Hutcheon, for example, in her paper, “The politics of postmodernism” (1989), says: “They



[horses] are like rummaging through image reserves of the past in such a way as to show the history of the representations their parody calls our attention to" (93). About these horses, Manpreet Sarma (2019) suggests: "By repeating the style and prototypes the writer is able to set up some sort of ritual with the audience. This feeling of joint experience establishes a bond between the text and its audience" (2). Another phrase that reappears in *Choke*, accruing more meaning as it does, is "What Would Jesus not do?" (2001:43).

It may also be that these 'horses' contribute significantly to the construction of character. Simply knowing these facts reveals something about the narrator: what type of person would internalise this type of knowledge? How would such a niche filter shape a person's worldview?

It can thus be concluded that *Choke* adheres to requirements that correlate with the perceptual identification dimension. Palahniuk often makes use of sensory and perceptual verbs, but he blurs the boundaries between narrator, character, and reader by relaying sensory information without mitigating it through such verbs. Furthermore, his generous use of the technique 'going on the body' fosters intimacy between reader and character, allowing them to share in 'evasive pleasures' considered taboo in a civilised society.

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### The cognitive identification dimension

**Proposition 3** of linguistic cues framework: "Linguistic cues of a narrative character's psychological viewpoint enhance the reader's cognitive identification with that character."- van Krieken, Hoeken & Sanders (2017)

Cognitive identification give readers access to a character's mindset. This section will consider Mancini's thoughts, expectations, aims, and intentions. Cognitive identification is likely influenced by linguistic elements that signal the character's psychological viewpoint, which verbs of cognition can linguistically encode. What is Mancini thinking? How has he come to think this way?

A character's psychological viewpoint can also be reported through various means of verbalisation. Gary Taylor (1986) observes how this can aid in characterisation as it "points up, shadows, and gives depth to the portrait" (1). Palahniuk (2020) says that "characterisation is achieved by having narrators reveal themselves through the particular words that they use to describe the world" (34). He uses the aforementioned "burnt tongue" technique wherein verbal mistakes speak volumes about a character's worldview. Mead agrees with this sentiment, saying "characters' very contradictions and inconsistencies reflect the fragmentation, decentering or even loss of self in the postmodern world "(Mead, 1990:443).

This slows down the reader, forcing him or her to reconsider, and perhaps even revisit, the words. For example, in an article published on *barnesandnoble.com*, Jeff Sommers (2015) points to this sentence from Palahniuk's 1999 novel, *Survivor*: "Today is just one of those days the sun comes out to really humiliate you" (25). Stylistically the sentence is quite awkward: the repetition of the word "day" seems redundant, and the word "really" seems unnecessary. However, as Sommers puts it, "it also has a neat little poetry to it, assigning agency to the sun and efficiently communicating a mood" (2015).

Steve White, a reviewer from *NovelDog.com*, explains that the repetition brings a rhythm to the writing and forces the reader to slow down: "[Burnt tongue is] a way of saying something, but saying it wrong, in an awkward and interesting way, twisting it to slow down the reader. Forcing the reader to read close, maybe read twice, not just skim along a surface of abstract images, short-cut adverbs, and clichés" (White, 2020). Sommers describes these unconventional sentences as "prose speed bumps: you have to feel every word" (2015).

### ***Voice***

The cognitive identification dimension also considers a character's voice, in other words, his or her manner of speech and tone. Mead (1990) likens a literary character's voice to an actor's appearance and costume: "In fiction, what a character says, as well as how he or she says it, makes a strong impression on the reader" (12).

Different characters may have different vocabularies; they may have unique diction or choose different topics of conversation. Readers may recognise a character by his or her rhythm of speech, cadence, or inflexions. A character may use a very distinctive pitch, place emphasis in unusual places or choose particular topics of conversation. Idioms or colloquialisms may characterise their speech. These idiosyncrasies allow the character's personality to seep out into the world.

Moreover, what Mancini's quirks reveal of him is not flattering. He has a flat, detached way of narrating the banal horrors of his everyday existence, contrasted by a numbed account of nihilistic destruction. He uses a lot of colloquial language; for example, he constantly refers to his penis as his "dog", he uses expletives frequently and does not shy away from language considered unfit for civil discourse. These manners of speech contribute to the reader's understanding of Mancini as an anti-social personality with a bleak worldview.

### *Forms of speech*

It is generally accepted that there are three canonical modes of thought representation

As Brian McHale (2014: page) explains, "[c]onsciousness, at least that part of it that resembles unspoken interior speech can be represented using the same three forms: directly, as quoted interior monologue; indirectly, as a report, also called psycho-narration (cf. Cohn 1978); or using free indirect discourse."

Palahniuk employs direct thought in his writing. One example is: "And I say: 'I thought you liked me better'" (*Choke*, 2001:226). However, Mancini has proven himself a chronic liar and therefore an unreliable narrator. His direct communication is less credible than the information that can be discerned from his thoughts. This is best illustrated when Mancini cannot express his feelings for Paige Marshall even though he knows he probably should. Instead, he feigns ignorance: "'I know, I know, I know this sounds terrible,' I say, but I don't know. This is what I think. Here's where I should tell Paige Marshall what I really think." (*Choke*, 2001: 35).

In other words, Mancini is an overtly unreliable narrator who compels readers to find the truth beyond his direct speech. It becomes evident that the words he speaks out loud to those around him are, more often than not, a lie.

The Palahniukian character is more inclined to use indirect thought, an example from the novel being Mancini saying: "Me, the deluded little rube who thought you could ever earn enough, know enough, own enough, run fast enough, hide well enough. Fuck enough" (2001:289). Thus, his preferred mode of conveying characters' thoughts is through free indirect thought.

The writers of the identification framework, Van Krieken, Hoeken and Sanders (2017), suggest that "direct thought represents a character's psychological viewpoint most explicitly since they verbalise thoughts verbatim" (8) and that "indirect thoughts do not depict thoughts in a literal way but paraphrase to a larger or lesser extent the inner voice of the character" (8).

However, I would argue that free indirect thought, as seen in Palahniuk's writing, has the most potential to foster identification. As suggested earlier, since a character's cognitive process is conveyed without using any verbs of cognition, the boundaries between author, narrator, character, and reader, eroded.

Furthermore, free indirect mode leads to the character's inner voice becoming intertwined with the narrator's voice. As a result, it becomes more difficult to distinguish between the two, meaning that the different strands of thought presented collapse into one.

From the above, it becomes evident that, owing to the unorthodox use of tenses, point-of-view, and sensory perception in his writing, Palahniuk achieves identification by relaying Mancini's cognitive processes using free indirect thought as the primary vehicle for achieving cognitive identification with the reader.

In other words, Victor Mancini, fosters identification within the cognitive identification dimension. This is done using direct, indirect, and free indirect thought, with free indirect thought being the most pertinent method. The writer puts the reader "inside the character's head" without signalling his thoughts using a cognitive verb.

## The moral identification dimension

**Proposition 4** of linguistic cues framework: "Linguistic cues of a narrative character's moral viewpoint enhance the reader's moral identification with that character." - Van Krieken, Hoeken & Sanders (2017)

Moral identification can be conceptualised as a process through which readers adopt the beliefs, biases, goals, and moral values of a character. Within this dimension, we are bound to find clues about the moral exchange between reader and antihero. Identifying the linguistic cues that signal the character's evaluations, attributions, memories, and desires may offer a window into the heart and mind? of the antihero and his complex relationship with the reader.

This proposition is perhaps at its most revealing when it comes to antiheroes and identification. One may be inclined to argue it is the only one of real consequence to the study at hand. However, the authors of the identification linguistics cues framework, van Krieken, Hoeken and Sanders (2017), caution that the dimensions are interdependent. "For the reason that in natural narrative discourse, the linguistic expressions evoking identification cannot be used in isolation. These expressions appear in combination and closely cooperate to establish a stronger or lesser degree of identification" (van Krieken, Hoeken & Sanders, 2017).

The question of morality is a thought-provoking one when it comes to Palahniuk's writing as "he treats flashpoint subjects without taking any kind of moral stand and treats bizarre behaviour as if it were absolutely normal" (Mookerjee, 2013:27). This, according to Palahniuk himself, is to allow "room for the reader to make his or her own judgments" (2020:3).

Kathryn Hume points out that transgressive satirists such as Palahniuk "maintain a sort of authorial anonymity that makes it difficult to extract some semblance of intent from their work, and this serves to challenge the reader's complacency that rests on common beliefs" (2013. 88).

A common complaint about Palahniuk's writing is that the narrative voice is flat. However, the neutral tone is deliberate: Palahniuk is seeking to present his characters without moral judgment. He calls this the "Recording Angel," a technique designed to show what is happening and what characters are thinking without judging them. In *Choke*, for example, Palahniuk does not hint at how the reader is supposed to feel about Mancini's sexual exploits or his choking scam. Instead, he simply describes the scene or action and allows Mancini to communicate his thoughts and feelings.

The ease with which this writing style comes to Palahniuk may well be the result of his journalism background: report the facts, and let readers decide what they mean. It allows Palahniuk to present all his unsavoury characters and their frequently appalling behaviour while remaining neutral and, instead, compelling the reader to consider them without attributing intent to the author. This obfuscation means readers must come up with their own conclusions. According to Palahniuk (2020: page), this means "readers must own their own opinions – whether they enjoy or are repulsed by what they are reading." The author reports on the events "and then stands there mutely tapping his finger on the scene until you make up your mind" (Hume, 2013:87). This lack of condemnation or support from the author compels readers to consider their own reactions instead of allowing an authorial voice to be the arbiter.

Hourigan (2010) suggests that it is this procedure that "makes Palahniuk's prose properly focused on an in-aesthetic excess against the distant narrative form of third-person voice, ultimately only allowing a point of view from the position of an "I", "you", or "we" for the finalisation of the reader" (28).

On writing his narrative subjects, Palahniuk says: "You risk revealing something that makes you look bad. You allow yourself to become the fool instead of the hero. . . . You admit your failures and weakness ... and in doing so, let your readers admit and accept their own" (2020:23). He further likens his fiction writing to therapy and his narrators to those confessing their flaws to a support group, explaining that

[they're] like idiot heroes, or fool heroes, in that if somebody steps forward and plays the fool, they create a place where everybody can just relax and not have to worry

about looking good. Which is what support groups are really about: . . . you can look like an asshole, and they still accept you (Palahniuk, 2020:18).

This may well contribute to the reasons why antiheroes are thriving despite their failings.

### **Motivations**

Another point to consider is whether a character's motivations play a mitigating role in his or her inappropriate behaviour. Motivations may well be the undercurrents that pull readers in the direction of the antihero.

When considering the morality of Victor Mancini in *Choke*, it is impossible to label him as anything else than amoral, unethical, sometimes cruel, and even downright criminal. His transgressions range from the unkind to the disgraceful. It is therefore imperative to recognise what lies at the root of Victor's vices to understand his moral makeup.

As mentioned earlier, one of his major transgressions is pretending to choke in expensive restaurants to compel people to save him. He then continues to extort these *saviours* for money based on the "old Chinese custom where if somebody saves your life, they're responsible for you forever. It's as if now you're their child" (*Choke*, 2001:13).

Most people will agree that these actions are reprehensible, and there is no denying that Mancini's objective is financial gain. However, there may be more gradations to the story. Palahniuk's writing is so layered that the cause and effect become a never-ending spiral where actions and motivations are unendingly linked by 'but'.

Mancini justifies his fraudulent actions of extorting people: "Why I do this is to create heroes. Put people to the test" (2001: 18). This suggests that he has the emotional intelligence to recognise that his actions have value, warped and complicated, but value nonetheless to those who "save him." "You're the proof of their courage. The proof they were a hero. Evidence of their success. I do this because everybody wants to save a human life with a hundred people watching. With the sharp tip of his steak knife ..." (13). However, in the following sentence, Mancini is

frank about his motivations: "Why I do this is to make money". The bland-faced callousness of this declaration once again casts him as a villain. Shortly after that, however, the reader learns that he uses the money for a worthy cause: "[It is] not as if I spend the money phoning up escort girls. Keeping my mom in St. Anthony's Care Center costs around three grand each month. These Good Samaritans keep me alive. I keep her. It's that simple" (13). The authorial voice is nowhere to be found. It is up to the reader to decide whether Mancini's actions are warranted or not.



Figure 7: Mancini's 'motivation spiral', showing his complex motivational reasoning.

Knowing the nature of his relationship with his mother makes his act of caring for her even more poignant. Not only did she steal him from his biological mother, but she was also the cause of all his childhood sadness and fear, as she was unstable and emotionally abusive.

Although most would agree that the end does not justify the means of Victor's circular reasoning, it becomes easier for readers to understand why Mancini does the reprehensible things that he does. Victor is certainly not the hero characterised by



Hassan's 'radical innocence' (1961). However, he is suffering entirely and utterly from the human condition, searching – and perhaps even finding - alternative forms of living that are contrary to the compelled identity produced by mass culture and society.

Finally, Palahniuk strengthens this identification that the reader now has with Mancini by putting the most central human need at the heart of his actions: love. "Somebody saves your life, and they'll love you forever" (*Choke*, 2001:22). The telling flashback of the childhood incident in which Victor was saved from choking reveals how he pines for love: "It seemed that moment would last forever. That you had to risk your life to get love. You had to get right to the edge of death to ever be saved" (*Choke*, 2001:3-5).

Richard Viskovic and Eluned Summers-Bremner suggest that "apparent trauma—materialised in the characters' self-inflicted ordeals—is at the centre of the narrative and leads the reader to find out the nature of the characters' real and concealed suffering" (2013: 101). Thus, although his present-day actions are contemptible, this memory gives the reader a better understanding of *why* he acts the way he does. Furthermore, it breaks down the barriers of imaginative resistance that prevent the reader from disengaging from immoral behaviour, allowing closer identification with the antihero.

### ***Relationships***

The interactions that antihero have certainly influence the way we feel about them. Take the TV serial killer, Dexter, for example. Although he is a homicidal fiend, his love and protectiveness towards his sister, Debra, serve as redemption. Hence, a better understanding of the character requires an analysis of their relationships with all the other characters in their world. As Keir Elam suggests: "The individual status of a character is defined through the network of oppositions (proairetic, pragmatic, linguistic, proxemic) that it forms with the other characters" (2002).

Victor's mother, in the present timeline, creates the financial burden that partly explains his shameless acts of choking. She also played a pivotal role in his formative years, where she was the source of most of his misery at the time.

Palahniuk recounts this twisted relationship between mother and son through vivid prose:

"Then leading him through the aisles, tugging his boneless little arm toward daylight outside the glass doors, the Mommy said, "You are mine. Mine. Now and forever, and don't you ever forget it." And pulling him through the doors, she said, "And just in case the police or anybody asks you, later on, I'm going to tell you all the dirty, filthy things this so-called foster mother did to you every time she could get you alone" (*Choke*, 2001:21).



**Image 7:** Angelica Houston is Victor's mother in the movie adaptation of *Choke*, directed by Clarke Gregg. Photo from IMDB.

Although it is clear that Mancini was just an innocent bystander during his childhood, the experience was so damaging to him that he blames his younger self, "Picture this all being his fault. The little peckerwood" (*Choke*, 2001:24). Instead of the immediate and intimate first-person perspective he uses throughout the narrative he switches here to a third-person point of view. Although the story is about himself as a child, he puts distance between him and the "stupid little weasel" (2). The effect is chilling. It provides a glimpse into his psyche, an understanding of why he is so disassociated from the world. Kavadlo points to this rewriting and reversal of the Oedipal story in *Choke* and how it contributes to the "narrative entrapment and concealment" of the character (2013: 242). However, Kavadlo further suggests that this very entrapment eventually gives way to Victor's "final release and self-revelation" as it enables him to remember that he can write his own story (242).

Another of Mancini's less admirable traits is his disregard for his sexual conquests. They are merely bodies to be used and discarded. "Wednesday nights mean Nico. Friday nights mean Tanya. Sundays mean Leeza" (*Choke*, 2001:45). However, his salvation appears in the form of Paige Marshall. After meeting her, he is bewildered to discover that not everyone is as disposable as he thought. Despite his efforts to denigrate her to just another body to be used, he is unable to do so: "Even in a church, even laid upon an altar, without her clothes, Paige Marshall, Dr Paige Marshall, I didn't want her to become just another piece of ass" (*Choke*, 2001:163). And "But with this Dr Paige Marshall, she seems to be above getting boned" (*Choke*, 2001:22).

In addition, Mancini has an endearing relationship with his friend and co-worker, Denny. He feels protective of Denny, who is possibly cognitively impaired and emotionally vulnerable. His concern for Denny is tender, almost charming. When Denny is locked in the stocks at the Renaissance village where they work, it is Victor who looks out for him: " Denny bends over, his wig falls off and lands in the mud and horse poop, and about two hundred Japanese tourists giggle and crowd forward to get his shaved head on videotape. I go, 'Sorry,' and go to pick up the wig ...Being bent over, his nose starts to run, and he sniffs. The wooden top half of the stocks swing closed to hold him around the neck, and I snug it down, careful not to pinch his skin. I say, 'Sorry, dude, that's got to be way cold ...' A clear little drop of snot dangles off the tip of Denny's nose, so I hold the rag against it and say, 'Blow, dude'" (*Choke*, 2001:45).

Victor also has a complex dynamic with some of the patients at his mother's mental healthcare facility. Every time she sees him, a patient named Eva transposes the abuse she suffered at the hands of her brother onto him:

"'You', Eva says and pokes a trembling finger at me. 'You hurt my woo-woo.' These stuck old people ... Whether she knew it or not, she's spent her whole life waiting and expecting men to diddle her. For serious, even mummied up in her wrinkled skin, she's still eight years old. Stuck ... everybody at St. Anthony's is trapped in their past" (*Choke*, 2001:19).

In a strange act of altruism, Victor absorbs the misplaced blame to give Eva some form of closure.

"Yeah, Eva," I say, "I boned you ...Yup. Every chance I got, I stuck it in you and humped out a load'. They call this psychodrama."

"So, you finally admit it,' she says ... She looks off at a blank spot on the linoleum floor and says, 'after all these years, he admits it.' This is role-playing therapy, only Eva doesn't know it's not for real ... Well, I guess if Jesus could die for my sins, I suppose I can soak up a few for other people" (*Choke*, 2001:19).

Eva is not the only one to whom he extends such bizarre acts of kindness. "The trouble is, anywhere else at St. Anthony's, it's the same deal. Another old skeleton thinks I borrowed five hundred dollars from her. Another baggy old woman calls me the devil. It's tough not to come here and soak up the blame for every crime in history" (*Choke*, 2001:45). Like some twisted Christ-head, a two-bit saviour whose cross is made from their fear and pain, Victor absorbs the sins of past and phantom perpetrators.

All this considered, there is a large measure of vindication when one takes Mancini's motivations into account. His traumatic childhood reveals the reasons behind his attitudes, beliefs, and desires, and allows some readers to discard their imaginative resistance and disengage morally from his transgressions. His kindness is complicated and sometimes misplaced, but the fact that he tries to ease the burden of some dementia patients reveals hidden compassion within him. Also, in his love for Danny and for Paige Marshall, one recognises that this flawed human does have the capacity to love.



**Image 8:** Victor (Sam Rockwell) and Denny (Brad Henke) are depicted in the 2008 movie *Choke* by director Clark Gregg. Photo from IMDB.

## The emotional identification dimension

**Proposition 5:** “Linguistic cues of a narrative character’s emotional viewpoint enhance the reader’s emotional identification with that character.” -Van Krieken, Hoeken & Sanders (2017)

When readers adopt a character's feelings and emotions, the process of emotional identification is put into motion. This dimension is facilitated by linguistic devices representing a character's emotional viewpoint, such as verbs of emotion, metaphoric expression, and adjectives. Focusing on Palahniuk’s use of these devices, I investigate how the reader is allowed to whittle away at Mancini's apathetic and unlikeable exterior to find his emotional centre.

Firstly, it is important to note the distinction between emotional identification and affective empathy. Joshua Stansfield and Louise Bunce (2014) explain: "Whereas affective empathy denotes the recognition of other persons' feelings, emotional identification is characterised by the adoption of the feelings of another" (2). For example, the reader might feel sympathetic (affective empathy) or sad (emotional identification) when a character is sad. Therefore, it is not enough to feel sad about the abuse Victor suffered at the hands of his mother or even to be empathetic to his sense of hopelessness. To consider him to be a compelling hero, one needs to identify emotionally with him. Van Krieken, Hoeken and Sanders (2017) suggest that verbs that denote emotions may well be one of the keys which unlock emotional identification between reader and character.

### *Verbs of emotion*

Verbs of emotion provide narrators with various possibilities to express characters' positive or negative feelings: "Nico and I love each other as much as any junkie loves his fix" (*Choke*, 2001:21) and "The only person we'll hate more than each other is ourselves" (56).

As with verbs of cognition, Palahniuk believes that verbs of emotion detract more than they add to a narrative. "Avoid abstract verbs in favour of creating the

circumstances that allow your reader to do the remembering, the believing, and the loving," Palahniuk said during an interview with *The Writing Cooperative* (2015), "You may not dictate emotion. Your job is to create the situation that generates the desired emotion in your reader."

Therefore, stative verbs of emotion such as love, hate, like, dislike, adore, loathe, desire, appreciate and want or need are mainly absent from his writing. His dislike of this word class appears to stem from his belief that they achieve the opposite of identification with readers. They prevent an actual moment of intimacy which would have been better spent 'showing' the love/hate/desire rather than telling readers about it so explicitly.

### **Adjectives**

The framework further suggests that adjectives promote identification between reader and character. Once again, Palahniuk subverts this supposition as his disdain for adjectives is well documented. Ordinary description in his writing is scant, and *Choke* is no exception. A parts-of-speech tagging tool reveals that fewer than 7% of the words used in *Choke* belong to the class of adjectives, 5.16% are adverbs.

#### **Parts of speech**

Nouns	25.44%
Adjectives	6.76%
Verbs	14.57%
Adverbs	5.16%
Prepositions	11.18
Pronouns	8.13
Auxiliary verbs	6.24



**Figure 8:** Parts-of-speech tagging of word classes in *Choke* using [analyzemywriting.com](http://analyzemywriting.com).

It is, therefore, interesting to note how Palahniuk uses the adjective *sad*. Although the word appears 13 times in the text it is never used to describe Mancini's emotional state. The 'lens' is always pointed outwards. It is used only to denote his observations, for example: "The sad tranced-out animals, the cross-eyed bears and gorillas and otters all hunched over themselves, their glassy little eyes almost closed, almost not breathing" (*Choke*, 2001: page). That does not mean that Palahniuk does not use emotion to foster identification between reader and character. Far from it. Instead of employing verbs of emotion, he creates a world that evokes the desired emotion in readers. Victor's description in the quote above, of how he experiences the zoo as a bleak, depressing place, are enough to break a reader's heart. Not only do readers recognise that this scene saddens Victor, but they also experience the sadness alongside him, removing yet another boundary between reader and character.

Descriptions are not entirely absent from Palahniuk's work. On occasion, he will describe a material – "apple-head doll" (53) - or draw an unconventional parallel – "boiled-looking" (32) - but readers will rarely come across common adjectives in his writing. In his book on writing, *Non-fiction: True Stories* (2005), Palahniuk explains: "Nothing is fed to the reader as 'fat' or 'happy'. You can only describe actions and appearances in a way that makes a judgment occur in the reader's mind" (144).

This approach forms part of the "Recording Angel" technique, as discussed earlier. Instead of making a moral or value judgement on a person, thing, or situation, Palahniuk provides important illustrative detail through which readers can create their own mental image. For example, in *Choke*, Palahniuk introduces the child-Victor to the reader with this sentence: "This bogus little Benedict Arnold just stands looking into the glare of the headlights, and lets the Mommy pull the favourite sweater off over his head" (2001:1). The scene communicates all these things without using adjectives such as 'pathetic' or 'pitiful' or 'helpless'. Instead, it conjures a picture of Victor as a small, helpless, naïve child – only, more visually and tangibly. The depiction of the child as "Benedict Arnold", a traitor, is so out of place that it amplifies the pitiful picture.

By allowing the reader to form his or her own mental image the author can position the character more effectively and achieve more authenticity. Reviewer Steve White from *Noveldog.com* explains why this technique is so effective: "If you tell

the readers something, they've no reason to believe you. But if you *show* them, they will draw their own conclusions. And you'll have tremendous authority as an author. Because readers will always believe their own conclusions" (2005).

Instead of adjectives, Palahniuk includes small, unusual details that are extremely specific to that moment and that situation. For example, on an occasion in which Denny finds himself in the stocks again, he is a pathetic sight. Instead of using adjectives to describe the woeful scene, Palahniuk zooms in on one detail: "His cravat, soaked in snot and crap, flaps in his face" (9). This type of detail forces the reader to process it, apply it to his or her own body and thus create an emotional reaction, even if unconsciously.

### ***Metaphoric expression***

Although Palahniuk's writing serves as an argument against the framework's proposal that verbs of emotion are imperative to identification, it does adhere to the principle that metaphoric expression achieves identification.

Palahniuk's writing is rich with metaphors, as illustrated by these examples from *Choke*: "I'm simplifying myself. Somewhere balanced in the perfect middle between happiness and sadness. Because sponges never have a bad day" (150) and "Denny and me, we're about as innocent as a tumour" (163).

Perhaps the most telling metaphor in the novel is Mancini's fetish video of the man, the monkey, and the chestnuts. Mancini's twisted reasoning makes the video an analogy for having nothing to lose and, thus, freedom. "These were all the promises he saw in the fat man's smile. So, after that, every time he was scared or sad or alone, every night he woke up panicked in a new foster home, his heart racing, his bed wet, every day he started school in a different neighbourhood, every time the Mommy came back to claim him, in every damp motel room, in every rented car, the kid would think of the fat man bent over. The monkey and the chestnuts. And it calmed the stupid little shit right down. It showed him how brave and strong and happy a person could become. How torture is torture and humiliation is humiliation" (*Choke*, 2001:52). This harrowing scenario becomes a way of escape for Mancini: "My entire private life made public. Nothing left to hide. The monkey and the chestnuts" (286).



Therefore, it can be concluded that *Choke* does not subscribe to all the linguistic cues that make up the emotional dimension. Where the framework suggests that verbs of emotion are essential to fostering identification, Palahniuk's dislike for such words casts doubt on the claim. The other cue identified by the framework is metaphorical expression, and *Choke* certainly adheres to this specification.

### The embodied identification dimension.

**Proposition 6 of linguistic cues framework:** "Linguistic cues of a narrative character's action and motions enhance the reader's embodied identification with that character." \_ Van Krieken, Hoeken & Sanders (2017)

The final dimension is embodied identification. Through this dimension, readers mentally simulate the character's movements, co-experiencing the events as they happen. " When processing narrative discourse, action simulation is prompted by linguistic representations of a character's actions and motions" (van Krieken, Hoeken & Sanders, 2017: 9). Therefore, this section will consider the linguistic construction of Mancini's corporeal form, his actions, and his way of being in the world. Physical descriptions of his appearance and action verbs will constitute the linguistics cues to be identified and analysed.

Van Krieken, Hoeken and Sanders (2017) refer to Fischer and Zwaan (2008), who explain how behavioural and neuroimaging studies show that language comprehension involves and perhaps even requires activation of motor systems. "This means that actions read in a language are mentally simulated without actually being physically executed (van Krieken, Hoeken and Sanders, 2017:9)." In the case of Mancini, the reader becomes a participant, or even an accomplice, in his actions and motions. When the reader reads how Mancini "staggered around Colonial Dunsboro

with the birth-deformed chickens, the drug-addicted citizens, and the field-trip kids who think this mess has anything to do with the real past"(80), he or she is right there sharing in his experience. When he chokes in a restaurant - "My hands go to gripping around my throat. I'm on my feet and gaping at the painted ceiling, my eyes rolled back" (15) the reader experiences the horror. As discussed earlier, the immediacy of the present tense and the intimacy of the first-person point of view enhance this shared experience.

### ***Verbs of action***

Keeseey and Wagner-Martin describe Palahniuk's work as "fast-moving plots with lots of action" (2016). And, indeed, the author himself has expressed an affinity for using action verbs. In an interview with DVDTalk, he said:

One thing I don't care for that really angered me, was fiction that just plodded along ... I wanted fiction based on verbs, rather than a fiction based on adjectives. I get into enough description as I can to get by, but I really think that's the reader's privilege to fill in the blanks and I'll handle the verbs (2011).

It is evident from the text that Palahniuk also has a fondness for participles. The following verbs using participles appear on page one of *Choke*, within a single paragraph: 'smiling', 'coming', 'wearing', 'biting', 'boiling', 'going', 'being', 'parking', 'whispered', 'looking', 'letting', 'scraping', 'hugging', 'lifting', 'crying'.

Palahniuk's enthusiasm for participles is in step with his objective to keep his plot moving forward. "Participles are -ing and -ed verbs," explains Jeff Anderson (2005), "that [evoke] action and movement in our sentences (168)."

Harry Noden (2011), who dubbed the participle "an -ing verb", explains that participles are also used "to combine or shorten active senses that have the same subjects or may be used after sense verbs (12)."

Apart from adding pace to a text, participles can also aid in the disruption of time. As Keith Pfeiffer (1931) puts it, "present tenses which indicate present time, and past tenses which indicate past time, cannot comprehend the sophistry of a present participle which indicates now present, now past, now future time. . . (42)." Therefore, it would be plausible to surmise that Palahniuk's use of participles

contributes to the disruption of time and space in the novel, eroding barriers between readers and protagonists while driving the action forward.

### ***Physical attributes***

It is widely acknowledged that the description of a character's physical attributes can contribute significantly to characterisation. However, in *Choke*, a physical description of Mancini is conspicuously absent.

Gerald Mead (1990) suggests that the very *absence* of description might be an effective technique for character representation. "Indeed, much modern fiction seems to favour just such deviations from traditional conventions of fiction" (Mead, 1990:22).

A reader must infer a mental image of Mancini from the rest of the text. For example, the fact that he has no problem securing sexual partners leads one to believe that he is not unattractive; his life is filled with drugs, and other destructive habits suggest he is not in peak physical condition. Likely, he is thin and most probably dishevelled.

Although the reader is told little about Mancini's physical attributes in the present, there are vivid descriptions of him as a boy. In these memory segments, embodied identification is strikingly different as it serves to put distance between reader and narrator. It is as if the reader is watching a movie alongside the narrator instead. This shared vantage point may serve to strengthen the bond between reader and protagonist.

The descriptions Mancini provides of himself as a boy are very unflattering. For example, he sketches a picture of a "little spaz" who is "about waist high with a handful of blond hair, combed and parted on one side." He has "some of his baby teeth missing", and his first adult teeth are coming in crooked. He's wearing "a stupid sweater striped blue and yellow, a birthday sweater", and he is "biting his dickhead fingernails" (*Choke*, 2001:4).

These memories of his childhood are mired in self-loathing, but they also evoke the mental image of a small, vulnerable, innocent child in need of protection. It may well be that because this is the only true description offered of Mancini it is

transposed onto the man as well. In the reader's eyes, Mancini is a man-child, the same clueless, innocent, if pathetic, little boy tortured by his unstable mother. This is fertile soil for achieving embodied identification.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the devices used in *Choke* align with the devices identified by the linguistics cue framework as developed by van Krieken, Hoeken and Sanders (2017). The text contains numerous verbs of action, a device that propels the action forward.

# CHAPTER 5

## Conclusion

This dissertation sought to identify the textual components which foster identification between protagonist and reader – especially if the protagonist is morally wanting, in other words, an antihero. In service of this goal, a linguistic cues framework developed within identity theory was employed, which put the benefits and boundaries of said framework to the test.

Many factors contribute to the rise of the antihero, including individual and societal factors. The investigation inferred that identification with the antihero hinges strongly on individual readers' willingness, or unwillingness, to disengage from their moral worldview to enjoy a narrative. It also seems sure that the antihero is a symptom of modern society. They fulfil a need that requires a different kind of courage that speaks to today's readers. In this context, failure becomes code for honesty; flaws are seen as strength, and humiliation clears the way for dignity.

Even though these factors play a vital role in accepting the antihero, the attributes inherent to the text are not to be disregarded. The linguistic cues framework goes a long way towards identifying and analysing textual determinants that may allow identification. Furthermore, several instances were found that support the assertions made by the framework, and a few that challenge its propositions.

For starters, Palahniuk's writing illustrates the importance of a shared vantage point between protagonist and reader. The textual devices that facilitate this include first-person narration, present tense, and proximal deictics, all hallmarks of Palahniuk's writing. An essential part of engaging with the story is the experience of feeling present, and through identification, the character becomes a proxy that transports the reader into the narrative world. This fosters an intimacy that is fertile soil for identification. Owing to the proximity, readers are likely to take on the

protagonist's goals and plans. They may well be more inclined to disregard immoral action if they view the story unfolding through the eyes of the antihero.

It also seems that the adage "show don't tell" plays an imperative role in identification. By minimising the use of verbs of cognition and emotion, Palahniuk turns Mancini into a fellow traveller sharing in an experience instead of someone who dictates the discourse. He is no longer just a stranger that engages in destructive behaviour but a human being with complex layers of motivation.

Therefore, it is evident that the linguistic cues framework is a valuable tool to understand textual influences on identification. However, I did find myself at odds with the prevailing sentiment that suggests that direct speech fosters the most identification of the three forms of literary speech. This unease arises because Palahniuk's preferred mode of conveying thought is through free indirect thought. He employs a form of metafiction to speak to readers directly, or even superimpose it onto the reader using the nominative "you." This blurs the boundaries between author, narrator, character, and reader, fostering further identification. This intimation needs to be considered in context, though; aspects such as stylistic choices may contribute significantly to creating the right conditions for it to be the case.

Another factor that contradicts the framework's assertions is Palahniuk's resistance to verbs of emotion and verbs of cognition. Where the framework suggests that these factors are important in fostering identification between character and reader, Palahniuk rejects them entirely in favour of verbs of perception and action verbs that drive the plot forward. The results of Palahniuk's work with verbs is closer, even more unmitigated, reader access to the story that is unfolding.

In conclusion, this study sought to understand how textual determinants are deployed to foster identification and explain the success of the antihero. With this study, we take a small step closer to understanding why antiheroes such as Mancini find such firm purchase in the hearts and minds of some modern-day readers. There are many advancements in the field of literary identification theory and audience engagement. Research using psychological and neurocognitive methods geared towards measuring the effects of identification will resolve many of the questions around protagonists' success, advancing our understanding of the antecedents that lead to this outcome.

What *can* be confidently asserted is that identification with a literary character is a multidimensional experience. It relies on a reader's ability to morally disengage when entering the fictional world, a socially receptive environment and adherence to, at the very least, *most* of the textual dimensions as outlined by the linguistics cues framework. Therefore, textual devices play an essential role in allowing readers to abandon moral disgust in favour of supporting the type of actions of a fictional character that they will not condone in the real world.

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