BELTHAR'S GARDEN

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Martin Hatchuel

For T C McL
Student. Teacher. Friend

1. Acacia melanoxylon

When Belthar stepped out of his door on that first morning, the ground was cold beneath his naked feet. Yesterday he'd stepped out of his job in much the same way and found, in much the same way, that the ground had been cold beneath him then, too. But this was a different kind of cold.

This cold he relished. This cold he enjoyed without the comfort of his old and favourite slippers. This cold came up at him from the clay and the mud of his garden and smelled faintly of citrus. This cold sat on the leaves of his tree like a silk scarf on a delicate neck. This cold shivered and shook in the clean, clear air. This cold was alive, unlike yesterday's cold, which was dead and smelled of must and dried up documents and long-closed files.

He looked around, squinting into the rising sun. His little three-roomed house stood above its landscape and his land sloped away towards a forest which he kept behind a fence fixed a hundred times with planks and poles, chicken wire and diamond mesh. The house itself was surrounded by a severely cut lawn, neat and green. Precisely one half of the way down the garden path, and precisely one meter to the right of it, stood an Australian blackwood. The tree had always chaffed Belthar, dropping its long, narrow leaves every Sunday at noon, just after he'd finished raking the previous week's crop, and dropping them with precision, equally on the lawn to one side and on the black-tarred, brick-edged path to the other.

There were no other plants on Belthar's land. In all his years at the office he'd never had time for them, their need for water or their demands for fertiliser and compost. It was enough that he mowed the lawn and raked the leaves.

'I am not,' he thought, a little bitterly after years at a desk in a room that looked out onto the blank wall of the building opposite, after years of listening to the hum and rattle of the air-conditioner as it tried to cool an office already chilled by the brittle politeness of three spiteful, busy-body accounts clerks, 'my Earth's keeper.'

The house had two bedrooms and a varnished wooden stable door and looked onto its garden through two large, cottage-paned windows. It glimmered prim and white under its low-pitched black roof, its neat porch arranged with a swing seat hanging from a naked and creeper-less wooden pergola.

It looked like a drawing by a child. Or, more correctly, like an adult's version of drawing by a child, with all the blocks neatly coloured in and all the colours trimmed inside their lines.

'What a mess,' he thought.

This first week of his retirement stretched before him uncluttered by schedule. No need to get up at 6:15, to bathe at 6:21 and to breakfast at 6:34. No catching the bus at 7:03 to bring him to the coffee bar nearby his office at 7:28. No talking with strangers who thought they'd become friends because they'd shared the same counter from 7:31 to 7:43 each workday morning for years and years.

No clocking in at 7:59, nor clocking out at 4:31 each afternoon. No Saturday morning shopping.

Nothing. Just the leaves to be raked on Sunday before noon.

"I am not," he said, aloud, "ever going to rake your leaves again. I won't do it. Never again." And he walked around the side of the house to his laundry where he stored his tools. He found his axe and his bow saw, inherited from his father and oiled and hanging precisely where they should, ready for the late summer day when the men would deliver the wood for the fires of winter, and he took his worn whetstone out from under its oily canvas cloth.

He sat on the step outside his laundry and sharpened his tools and the weak, early sun of spring began to warm him.

Belthar had lived alone almost for ever. Once this had been his mother's house and then sometimes they'd had visitors, but when she died the visitors came less and less until entire seasons went by when Belthar was the only person who'd entered his door. And it had become a cold and unlovely place and he had become a cold and unloved man.

Belthar didn't think of his tree as a link with the outside world, as his only connection to the forest which surrounded his garden; and as to the world of men - well, he'd become detached from that already. And from now on he knew that his pension would be paid into his bank account every month and that he'd draw the money he needed every week. But his conversations with his bankers

and his grocerers, his butchers and his tailors had always been short and sudden and businesslike, and none of them had warmed to him, this strange and silent man.

No, to Belthar the tree was something sinister; it was a symbol that needed to be struck down and removed from his land and his life.

He pulled on a pair of thick leather gloves, and, still barefoot, took aim and swung at the trunk of the tree. The axe bounced away almost without scratching the bark but he persisted, stripping the layers one by one to form a wedge that would direct how the tree would fall.

He thought of his years at work and of how it used to be - open a file, close a file; open a file, close a file - a rhythm a little like his rhythm today.

He thought of the invoices and receipts, of how the paper felt, the dusty, crinkly staleness that dried his skin when he went into the archives and the satisfying, bright newness when he opened a ledger for the first time, smoothing his palm over the marbled endpapers, the silkiness of the swirls of colour, the reds and blues, the purples and browns. And in it all there'd been a satisfaction to what he'd done, a tidiness, an orderliness once the numbers were distilled into debit and credit, profit and loss.

And how would it be in the office today? Everything lost, no doubt; everything out of place.

Incompetents. Time wasters.

By ten, when he'd been working for almost an hour, he needed to rest and he went into his kitchen to drink some water and then he rinsed the glass and stood it upside down to dry in the middle of his draining board.

When he began again, with the chopping and falling of the axe he thought of Edward Passmore, his boss, the chartered accountant and auditor to almost every large firm in the town. And he chopped a little faster and worked a little harder as he thought of him, of his satisfied smile when he greeted a client, of his contempt when he spoke to a worker, of the sniff of cigarettes on his breath (Belthar had never even tried to smoke: the smell made him queasy) and of the warm, heavy press of his hand on Belthar's shoulder as he leaned over him to check his work.

By eleven he had to rest once more for he was an old man and his body was soft and white.

He thought of the office's annual Christmas party, always stiff and uncomfortable, always on the lawn of the big man's house with its columns and balconies and views of the Lagoon. And he thought of wilted lettuce salads in the November heat, smell of charcoal and burning meat, warm beer and soft bread rolls with margarine, Edward Passmore as Father Christmas with buff envelopes for the staff and cheap tin and (later) plastic presents for their children.

At three, when he'd finished his meal and the afternoon had begun to cool, he began to thwack, thwack, thwack again and he worked longer in the gathering softness of the light.

This was the time of day he had most enjoyed at the office, the quiet time when the others sat heavy from their lunch and he was left alone. Then he'd lean his forehead on the tent of his fingers and check and cross-check his columns of figures against invoices and receipts; or he'd straighten his back in his oak captain's chair and sort his papers into order by date or number.

'Funny how you only realise when you were happy after it's gone,' he thought.

Was he happy? He supposed he had been, in his way. His work was dull and boring, but Belthar thought of himself as a dull and boring man. He knew there were men who went out to discover and adventure, but as long as nothing disturbed him he was content to stay and follow his schedules, his house in the suburbs, his office in town.

And if contentment was happiness, then, he thought, he must have been happy.

At four thirty he stepped back and looked at what he'd done and he saw that the wedge was deep enough and he was satisfied that the tree would come down in the morning. And before he went inside to cook his supper, he raked all the chips into a pile and carried his axe and his unused saw to his laundry where he oiled them and hung them correctly in their allotted places on the wall.

He slept undreaming that night and creaked out of bed the next day. But by nine he'd loosened up enough to fetch his axe and start to swing at his tree once more.

This morning he began to cut a little higher than yesterday, chopping at the opposite side of the trunk and working his way down towards the oozing, open wound of the wedge. The sap was thick and red and during the night it had formed a necklace of bright, glistening beads around the dark of the heartwood.

And now that he was near the heart and now that he'd found his stride, Belthar could see the progress of his work and suddenly he found a freedom in every swing of his axe. It was clean and it

was simple and it was good to feel the muscles pulling in his shoulder and his back. And it was its own reward. At work, he'd relied on his boss and the girls for that, for their occasional and grudging recognition of a job well done, of a small favour, of a little thing that went beyond what he was paid to do.

With the ease brought on by a second wind, he chopped without resting, chopped into the morning, chopped just because he wanted to hear the axe against the wood and its echo in the suburban silence, chopped until he knew that his tree would fall before he took his lunchtime break.

It started to creek at noon, and to sway in the light spring wind that always came up at this time of day at this time of year.

At 12:30 the swaying became a pendulum. 'What if I've miscalculated?' he thought. 'What if it falls on my house?'

Thwack, thwack, thwack...

The tree swung for the last time at 12:38 precisely, and Belthar stepped back as it came down, cracking and whooshing, slowly at first and then with gathering speed and then it hit the ground and bounced once and shuddered and lay still. And yes, it pointed towards the forest, just as he'd wanted it to do; but it had also fallen across his fence and the torn wire and broken posts left the old man uncomfortably with an unease he couldn't understand.

Still, he was satisfied. Over the coming weeks he would cut the tree into logs and chop the logs into faggots and split them and stack them neatly to dry for his fire in winter; then when that was done he would patch the fence and restore the grass where the falling tree had scarred the ground and then his life would be simple because he wouldn't have to rake its leaves every Sunday at noon.

But as he walked up to his fence to check the damage he found himself crying uncontrollably.

And with no one to see him and no one to hear, Belthar, cold-hearted, lonely Belthar, allowed himself to weep.

He hadn't cried in forty-seven years.

2. Cupressus sempervirens ‘Stricta’

On the third morning of his retirement, Belthar visited a nursery. He’d slept badly, woken again and again by guilt and pain. Every time he’d tried to turn in the night his arms had seared him and he’d felt the thwack, thwack, thwack and the relentlessness reminded him of how it had felt to be seasick, the nausea refusing to still itself even after you’ve stepped off the boat and back onto solid ground.

It was quite unlike him to leave a mess and the dead tree was a mess, lying across his lawn and his fence like an accusing finger, its leaves greying now and falling faster than ever before. But Belthar was tired and he wanted to make amends.

The chopping could wait.

He’d never visited a nursery and he didn’t know what to expect or even what to wear for the occasion. All his life he’d dressed according to a code prescribed by others. At school there was the grey serge uniform, with its silly round cap and its heavy blazer and short pants even on the coldest, wettest days, even when winter blew off the ocean, ice on the ground in the mornings and his knees chapped and raw. In the army the uniform was khaki and brown with stiff boots and scratchy trousers which he ironed to a sheen. And when he started working he wore his suits in the colours of yesterday, and the suits and the ties and the short-sleeved shirts said office clerk - and that made them a uniform no less.

But today he was going to visit a nursery, a plant nursery, and Belthar had never been to a nursery before. He chose a clean white shirt and a red paisley tie and a pair of grey slacks and his tweed sports blazer because tweed seemed like the fabric of gardens (before he’d cut it down, he’d been in the habit of ironing his clothes on Sunday evenings while his tree dropped its leaves on his pathway and his lawn. Now, he supposed, he’d have to think of other times to do his chores).

His shoes and his wide-brimmed grass hat (the one he used for mowing his lawn) he chose for comfort because the nursery was an hour’s walk away.

Belthar set out at nine thirty precisely, dragging his wheeled wicker shopping basket behind him. His house stood at the end of a road in one of the older suburbs, elevated and north-facing but hidden by a saddle of land and a patch of forest from those famous views of the Lagoon and the mountains which attracted visitors from around the world.

And being in one of the older suburbs, the gardens which surrounded Belthar’s were leafy and tree-lined and well tended, opulent with manicured rows of white daisies and pink roses and red hibiscus, gilded with marigolds, carpeted with close-mown lawns, cosseted behind neatly clipped hedges or soldiered wooden fences and decorated with well-washed, brushed-out dogs which threw themselves at their fences and barked excited as he passed.

The morning was blue and green as he walked and soon he was warm and he began to sweat. His was a well-heeled suburb and most of his neighbours had old money and the luxury of hired gardeners, and he nodded stiffly to them as they stood smoking on the sidewalks, leaning on their rakes and watching him expressionless until he nodded a formal, don’t-talk-to-me hello, and then smiling and waving cheerily at him.

He walked past the golf course, under tall gum trees hung with strips of peeling bark, past the veterinary and the holiday resort and he touched his hat stiffly to the drivers who knew him and waved to him, people who’d known him all his life, all of them surprised to see him walking on a Wednesday, weekday morning.

‘Don’t suppose they now I’m retired,’ he thought. ‘And why would they?’

At the Main Road he turned left and walked past the supermarket whose bread he preferred (their loaves were square: bread from the other bakeries was always rounded on top and he was forced to cut off part of every slice so that it would fit his toaster), past the greengrocer to whom he hadn’t spoken in years (some argument about a split watermelon) and past the department store where his mother had bought their heavy stinkwood furniture (which he continued to oil on the first Saturday of every month as she had always have him do).

At Church Street he turned right and there, settled under the shade of an ancient, spreading oak and on the left hand side of the road just before it started its run up the hill to the high school and the old colonial houses of the Upper Town, was the nursery.

To enter you passed through a low-ceilinged shop filled with seeds and bulbs, books and tools and gifts. Its walls were painted a light pasty green and it smelled strongly of fancy soaps. He went inside and waited, but there was no one at the desk and the till was unattended. He was tired and wished for a glass of water and he thought 'I'll treat myself to tea when this is over.'

At last a smiling, heavily pregnant woman came in and, wiping her forehead with the back of a muddy hand, said, "Oh, hello. I didn't know you were there. You should've rang," and she picked up a long-handled school bell and set it tinkling.

"Yes, well..."

"What can I do for you?" she said, returning the bell to the desk. "Looking for something special? Or do you just want to browse?"

"I, er..."

"Oh, no hurry. Take your time. You want to sit down for a while? There's a bench out there under the tree, if you want to use it. Sure I can't help you with anything?"

She was infuriatingly breezy, and Belthar wondered if her husband knew that she was out and working in her condition. He'd never had any experience of pregnant women, but shouldn't they be kept at home?

Belthar stared at her. "Think I'll just look around," he said and blushed. He wanted to escape her swollen stomach; he wanted to keep himself from looking at it. It was uncovered; her vest - it was olive green and mud-stained and he could see the straps of her bra - seemed too small for her. It left her midriff open and her bellybutton bulged out like a miniature pregnancy of its own on the bigger mountain of her stomach.

He knew he had to look away, he knew it was rude to stare but he couldn't stop himself - surely it was just as rude to appear in public like this? - so he turned suddenly and walked through the back of the shop and out under a wooden, creeper-filled pergola and into the lines.

The plants were ranked in neat, labelled rows, arranged according to type and height. He liked that. The pathways were laid out under the oak; they were edged with rough wooden battens and filled with bark chips and they radiated from the tree like spokes from a hub. He enjoyed walking on the bark, soft and springy and comfortable, and he stopped to read every label with care, surprised to find that every plant had different names in English and Afrikaans and in Latin, too. 'That's probably just to impress the tourists,' he supposed. 'The French and the Germans like that kind of thing.'

Most plants bothered Belthar. They were untidy. They pushed out of their pots and plastic growing bags in unruly display. They tumbled. They were bewilderingly unfamiliar and it was clear that they had no self discipline at all. But still he continued along the paths, discovering them methodically and examining each one meticulously.

He read all the herbs but he didn't like any of them. And besides, the herbs he used on Tuesdays when he cooked his Tomato Pasta With Italian Seasoning came in a bottle which would have had to have been sterilised at the factory. No, herbs weren't for him; you didn't want to eat herbs out of your garden, all splashed with mud and dirtied.

He read all the shrubs but he didn't like any of them, with their spreading habits.

He read all the climbers but he didn't like any of them: he wasn't going to be fooled by a red trumpet-shaped flower or a white deeply fragrant. He knew how creepers took over if you gave them the chance.

He read all the trees, but he had made up his mind before he even got near them that he wouldn't like any of the trees. They'd want to litter his lawn and his pathway, just like his blackwood had done.

He'd been in the nursery for more than an hour when he began to read the conifers. He'd never heard of conifers before, but there was something precise about them with their compact growth habits and their neat appearances. Of course there were the scramblers and the spreading habits here, too, but one plant in particular caught his eye:

Graveyard Cypress
Italiaanse Sipress
Cupressus sempervirens 'Stricta'
DESCRIPTION: Specimen tree with straight growth habit almost military in its precision. Leaves deep green.
SIZE: 5 - 8 metres; maximum spread 1 metre.
EVERGREEN; EXOTIC
R19.95

"Sure I can't help you?" asked the pregnant woman. She'd returned to her potting bench when he'd gone into the nursery and she'd watched him as she'd worked. She liked old people and he amused her and she thought of an old dog, a Labrador perhaps, or a golden retriever, half blind but still curious, out for its walk and sniffing around gingerly and carefully. "You've been looking really closely at everything. Keen gardener are you?"

Belthar flustered. "No, I'm not a gardener. I'm just looking for a tree."

"And you haven't found anything yet? How tall should it be? Do you want it for shade?"

He tried to answer her but she spoke too quickly and he was getting irritated. And there was her stomach, too.

The woman looked at him with a smile. Her head was tilted slightly, and she looked to him like a willing puppy that wanted to understand what its master was saying. And although Belthar didn't like dogs much, he found himself warming to her a little. She was sweet and she really was trying to help.

"No, I'm not a gardener. I cut down my tree. Need to replace it. This one looks interesting."

"Oh, why'd you do that? Was it diseased? What was wrong with it?"

"Nothing," said Belthar, rolling his hand over and over the handle of his basket and forcing himself to look down at the plants in the rows before him.

She could tell he wasn't going to answer her, so instead she said, "Rather a severe looking tree, the cypress. And of course there are those who are superstitious. You're not superstitious, are you?" and her smile cracked and her teeth were perfect and white. And then she laughed a little. "Don't be shy. Are you superstitious?"

"Superstitious?"

"Superstitious. Of cypresses. They grow them in graveyards."

"Not in our graveyard. Our graveyard's got those messy things with the big leaves."

"Yes, London planes. I don't know why they planted plane trees there. They've got them at the church, too. And this oak?" she said, waving her hand in front of her face, pointing at the spring-time greenness of the leaves above where they stood and the jigsaw of branches that held them. "Why'd they plant this oak right here? Not that I'm complaining, of course, but oaks and planes aren't indigenous, are they? You'd think they'd plant something indigenous in a public place, wouldn't you?"

"Indigenous?"

"Yeah, indigenous. You really aren't a gardener, are you?"

"I'll take this one." It was all he could think of to get rid of her and her mountainous stomach.

He bent down to pick up the first plant in the row, but she stopped him. "That's not such a good one," she said, moving into the lines to select a better specimen, straighter and more compact. "Here, take this one rather," she said, lifting it easily and passing it over to him.

He hesitated: surely she shouldn't be lifting like that? But she held it out and he had no choice, so he took the cypress and fitted it into his basket.

"Will that be all? What about some colourful annuals to plant around it? And do you have enough compost?"

"No annuals. No compost."

"No compost? You have to have compost when you plant it. Or do you have compost at home? And you really ought to put some colour into your garden for the summer. Don't you want something for colour for summer?"

She was leading him towards the office now, his basket bobbing along behind him, the cypress nodding and swaying as he walked.

Suddenly she stopped and turned to him. “You really aren’t a gardener, are you? Do you know how to plant that? Should I tell you? Our advice is free, you know.”

“No.”

“We’ve got a handout about planting trees, if you want one,” and she smiled again and turned and continued walking.

Inside, she sat down heavily behind her desk and started searching through its drawers. She pushed the papers and the plastic bags that filled them this way and that until at last she found a messily printed, photocopied brochure, its cheap, dull green paper folded casually into three. She handed it to him and he read it carefully as she watched.

“I don’t have any compost or fertiliser,” he said.

“Oh well, then you can buy it. Do you want some? A small bag of compost and a little bit of bone meal? I can pour some bone meal out into a shopping bag for you, I’ve got an open one and you won’t be able to carry that much, and I don’t suppose you’d need that much, either, would you? I prefer bone meal. It’s organic, but you wouldn’t want to use it if you’ve got dogs. Have you got dogs?”

“No dogs.”

She got up again and went out to the fertilisers and came back with the compost held in both hands against her stomach, the bag of bone meal swinging from her elbow and bouncing against her as she walked.

“You walking home?” she said. “How far do you have to go? Will it all fit?” But he was too confused to answer, and he stepped back to allow her to arrange his basket.

“Will that be all then? I hope the wheels can take the weight. It’ll be twenty nine rand ninety five, please. No charge for the bone meal and the advice is free, like I say.”

Belthar took his pocket book out from inside his jacket, counted the notes and handed them to her. “Thank you,” he said. He was still staring at her stomach, although he didn’t want to, and now he was impatient to get away from her. ‘What if she starts to have it now?’ he thought.

He took his change and turned to go and as he walked out of the door she called out a happy, “Come again soon.”

And he was shamed into turning back to her and gravely wishing her “Good morning” before he turned again towards the car park and started to walk away.

Suddenly she shouted, “What’s your name? Mine’s Cath. Catherine. But they call me Storm.”

He stopped and turned once more. No shop keeper, no stranger had asked his name in years. “Belthar,” he said. “My name is Belthar.”

3. Senecio elegans

Belthar wheeled his cypress through the arcade that ran from the parking area outside the nursery, crossed the main street and sat down at a coffee shop and ordered tea. The girl told him her name and said, "I'll be your waiter today," but she didn't ask who he was and she looked bored and he drank and paid without tipping. Then he walked home and stored the tree in his laundry where it would be safe and arranged its compost and its bone meal on the floor beside it, one on top of the other, patting the compost bag flat and square and folding the bag of bone meal carefully over itself because he didn't like the smell. Then he changed into his working clothes and folded his sports jacket, trousers and tie onto their hangars and placed his shirt in the laundry basket in his bathroom. He made a lunch of sandwiches and tea, listening as he ate to the two o'clock news on the old fashioned wood-grained wireless in his kitchen. He washed the dishes during the weather report: partly cloudy and mild to warm; maximum a comfortable 24 degrees, cooling to 10 degrees tonight. The wind light south easterly and no rain forecast for the next forty eight hours. High tide at 3:49 this afternoon.

Good. That meant it was spring tide, although he hadn't been on the water in years.

And then when he was ready, he stepped outside to begin the removal of his blackwood.

In the beginning he found it heavy going but his body soon became used to the work and by and by he began to look forward each morning to the labour of the day. He kept a strict routine. Starting at nine, he sawed at the tree for forty five minutes of every hour and he drank a large glass of water at the end of every session. His meal and rest he took between one and two. Every afternoon at four he stopped his cutting to sweep the sawdust and the leaves and the twigs into separate piles, to arrange the smaller branches onto a heap for kindling and to stack the logs and make them ready for chopping.

At 4:30 he wiped his saw with its oil rag (always the same rag) and wrapped the rag around the blade and tucked it into the handle and hung the saw on its place in the rack.

It took two weeks to cut up the blackwood and put it away, and it was thus only on the seventeenth day of his retirement that Belthar turned to the planting of his cypress.

He had read and studied the nursery's handout, and knew that he must begin by determining the correct position for his new tree. As he sat on his swing, rocking a little and thinking, he surprised himself by thinking, too, of Cath, and wondering how she would advise him.

It would be wrong to plant the cypress too near to the pathway, he thought, because that would be to invite the same problems he had had with his blackwood.

It would be wrong to plant it too near to the house, he decided, because it would only drop its leaves in the gutters, then.

It would be wrong to plant it too close to the fence, he knew, because that would be to tempt it into pulling the wire askew.

And because his old tree had grown to the right of the house, the best he could do would be to plant the new one to the left.

He went inside for a ball of string and a handful of six inch nails (nails which he'd once, long ago, bought for repairing his fence). Then he pegged the line to the corner of his house and drew it out to a nail at the corner post of his land and at the midpoint between the two he marked the midpoint for his hole.

The paper called for a square hole, one metre by one metre by one and he used the nails and the string to mark an outline and then he began to dig. Never having had need for them, he had very few garden tools: his axe and his bow saw for cutting wood, a spade for edging his lawn, a lawnmower for cutting it and a rake and broom for sweeping and, of course, for tidying up after his blackwood. He'd never bought a garden tool - even his mower was the old barrel model that they'd had when his mother was alive - but now he found himself struggling to get his spade to dig into the ground. The soil was hard and he supposed there were other implements to be had, and he wished he had them and that the girl was here to tell him how to use them.

But Belthar was tough and his hole grew nevertheless.

On the eighteenth day the hole was complete, and he measured it to be sure: one metre by one metre by one. Precisely.

He fetched the compost and the bone meal and mixed them in with the topsoil which he'd set aside, perfectly as the hand-out had directed. Then he refilled the hole and opened a small dent in the middle of the fresh-mixed soil, just deep enough for the root ball, and left it open like that and went back to his laundry to fetch his tree.

Funny: the leaves seemed to have shrunk and most of them fell off when he picked up the dry and dusty Cypress - which, he decided, was very much lighter than it had been when he'd wheeled it home. 'Typical,' he thought. 'There's no quality these days.'

And he carried his tree to its hole.

He tore open the bag and lifted the hard, clay-like root ball and, measuring carefully, placed it squarely where it was going to grow. Now he back-filled with the last of the topsoil, shaped a watering basin and tidied the lawn.

He had no watering can and no hosepipe so he watered the tree with the bucket he'd always reserved for washing his kitchen floor. He filled at his tap and carried it to the hole and emptied it and then he did so once again, and it was during his second emptying that he heard her voice.

"Hello, Belthar. Watering your cypress, are you? It's my day off, and I've brought you something. May I come in?"

She was standing at his gate, waving as she called, her stomach still as large as it was. Today she had on a T-shirt, and that at least covered her properly, but she had to crane her neck to see around the fencepost and she was stretching onto her toes and he thought 'that couldn't be good for her, not in that condition.'

In her left hand she held a plant; one of those straggling, pink-flowered things.

Belthar put down his bucket, straightened slowly and walked across to the gate. "Afternoon, Cathy," he said.

"Oh, no one calls me that," she said. "Call me Storm. I've almost forgotten that I'm a Catherine." She drew out the last word and did a dance with her head to show how fancy she thought the name.

"How'd you find me?" he said, and realised that he was extraordinary happy she had.

"Oh, I asked around. My old boss knows you, your company used to do his books. So I called your old boss, Mr Passmore, but he wasn't available. His secretary told me you were retired and she gave me your address and here I am. It's my day off. I brought you this wild cineraria. Something indigenous for your garden."

And she looked around.

"But," she said, "it's not much of a garden."

4. Buxus macowanii

Belthar stood on his neat pathway and looked at his neat lawn with its neat scar where his blackwood had been and at the neat, leafless skeleton of his neat, newly planted cypress. “Sorry,” he said, although he didn’t know why he needed to apologise to her. “I haven’t fixed the fence yet. It broke when my tree fell. I wasn’t expecting...” and he trailed off, horrified at what he had said because it was quite clear that she was expecting. Any moment now.

‘Why’d she have to come here?’ he thought. And he began to blush. But still he stood. His hands kept lifting and falling, as if he was about to say something. He put them in his pockets to keep them still.

“Here,” she said, handing him the cineraria. “It wants sun.”

“Sun?”

“You should plant it in the sun.”

“Oh,” he said. “I didn’t hear your car.”

“I took a taxi.” The shared minibus-taxi that served the maids and the gardeners of the area. He saw them in the mornings and evenings and at lunchtimes, but he’d never seen a white person using them.

“But you’re...”

“Pregnant?” and she laughed again. “I still have to get around.” She pointed at the gate. “Mind if I come in?”

“Yes,” he said and lifted the latch and held the gate open for her. She was flustering him, just as she had at the nursery.

He lead her along the path, but as he stepped aside to let her into the house she turned towards the swing bench. “Sure I can’t sit here? It’s a beautiful day, isn’t it? Here I can see your garden. Inside is too... indoors for me. Don’t you think?”

“Indoors. Yes. Tea? I haven’t any cake.”

“I’m not keeping you from your work, am I? Hey? Well, then tea would be super.” He went inside to boil the kettle. “You haven’t any flowerbeds,” she called from the stoep. “Where are you going to plant your cineraria?”

When he came out with the tray she wasn’t sitting on the swing where he’d left her; she was standing looking at the cypress. “It’s dead,” she said.

“Beg pardon?”

“It’s dead. Your cypress is dead. Didn’t you water it? You have to water them, you know.”

“You saw me watering it.”

“Yes but when was the last time?”

“This was the first.”

“Didn’t you water it after you brought it home from the nursery?”

“Your paper didn’t say I should. It said I should water it after I planted it.”

“And when did you plant it?”

“Today.”

She laughed. “You really don’t know anything about gardening, do you?”

“First time I’ve been to a nursery,” he said, defending himself again.

“You what!” she laughed again. “You’ve never been to a nursery? Belthar, where have you been all your life?”

“At the office.”

And she laughed a third time, and Belthar thought again how irritating she was, even laughing in threes.

“Your tea’s by the swing,” he said.

“Lovely. Don’t you want to have it here?”

“What, on the lawn?”

“Yes, come on. It’s a lovely day. Let’s sit on the lawn in the sun here by your dead cypress,” and he thought she looked like a camel, the way she eased herself part by part down onto the ground.

He’d never had his tea on the lawn before, but he brought the tray down off the porch, hoping that if he humoured her she’d go away.

He poured and they sat, sipping at their cups and staring at his cypress. The shadows from its bare branches traced a jagged, almost invisible line against the soil and the grass. “You could plant your cineraria here, in place of your cypress. You’ve already prepared the hole. ‘Course you’ll have to take the cypress out.”

“Out?”

“Well it isn’t going to grow anymore. It’s dead. And the cineraria would look great here. It’ll spread and give you pink flowers in summer.”

“Spread?” he didn’t like plants that spread. He’d chosen his cypress because of its military precision, and trees of military precision didn’t spread.

“You like formal gardens, don’t you, Belthar? Neat and everything in its place? Natural gardens aren’t for you, are they?”

“Formal? Natural?”

She laughed again. “You should plant a box hedge around your cineraria. You can get an indigenous box. That’s what you should do, plant an indigenous box. Like a French garden. Versailles. That sort of thing.”

He hadn’t a clue what she was talking about. “Box? French? Versailles?” he repeated, maddened by the hope that she’d leave.

Now she looked at him long and hard, her smile moving her face to its fullest beauty. “Belthar,” she said, you need a library.”

5. Araucaria cookii

On the nineteenth day of his retirement, Belthar dressed once again in his sports jacket and once again dragged his wheeled wicker basket into town. He'd arranged to meet Storm (he'd never again think of her as Catherine) at the municipal library and he found himself quite excited. It was almost as if she was his friend.

The library presided over one side of the square. Like all the important buildings in town - the war memorial which had recently been forced to brood behind a galvanised steel fence, the old gaol which had recently been reborn as an art centre, the town hall which had recently been hidden behind a more modern, more rabidly bureaucratic red brick office block - the library was finished in dressed stone and was designed to impose. Its stone had been quarried a hundred years ago from a pit on the western edge of town, and the walls were covered now in moss and algae and looked as ancient as rocks in a field. Through tall sash windows with green wooden frames, cracked and peeling and in need of painting, Belthar could see a class of green-blazered school children listening as a story was read to them in one room and, in another, a class of blue-rinsed pensioners attending politely on a speaker who stood by a stand and a chart of paper covered with scribbles.

Outside the library, surrounded by a curlicued Victorian fence, a little patio with benches shaded by the town's Christmas tree.

Belthar had never had time for the Christmas tree. It burned brightly for a month or so every summer, and when she was alive and before she had taken to her long and endlessly lingering sick bed, his mother would take him to its annual lighting ceremony, all the white people of the town singing toneless carols, dutifully reverent. But the Christmas tree had always looked a little desperate to Belthar, its uncoloured lights hanging untidy from its neatly layered branches.

A sign identified the tree as a Cook's Island pine planted during a visit ashore when some royal had sailed this coast fifteen years before Belthar was born. His mother reminded him, when the lights were lit every year, of how she remembered the occasion well and of how they had all dressed with bonnets and gloves to watch the procession.

"A glorious day, Belthar," she would say. "A glorious day," she would say, every single time.

Belthar sat on the bench beneath the tree, enjoying its shade. He took from his basket the sandwich he'd made for himself and carefully spread a napkin on his lap and settled down to enjoy his picnic.

Although he'd never done so himself, Belthar had, in the years since he'd begun coming to the library, seen hundreds of people sitting on these benches to eat their lunch. He'd always eaten his at his office; except, of course, on Fridays. On Fridays he took a plate of soup and a roll at the coffee bar in the square (he preferred a table by the window, with his back to the light) and rose from his meal at 1:25 to walk slowly around the cenotaph to the library, which he entered at 1:30. He'd always gone first to the desk and waited as the clerk checked in the books he'd read. Then he made his way to the paperback section to choose, between 1:32 and 1:45, two more novels for the week ahead.

And now he hadn't visited the library in nearly three weeks because he'd been cutting his blackwood. 'Probably get a fine for being late,' he thought as he leaned forward and looked into his basket to check that the books were still there.

'Never had a fine before.'

He pulled out one of the books and turned to the dates which were stamped on the sheet of cheap paper that was glued to the inside of the front cover. The sheet was skew and lines of dates were crooked and the book was puffy from use. 'What day is it today, anyway?' he thought, suddenly confused.

Retirement had come as an inconvenience and Belthar still hadn't created a proper schedule for himself. But a schedule needed dates and who knew what had happened to dates in these recent weeks?

He looked at his watch. No date there. And Storm was late.

He finished his sandwich and wiped his mouth neatly with his napkin and folded the napkin neatly in his lunch box and put the lunch box neatly in his basket. At last he allowed himself to lean back. He stretched his legs out a little, crossing them at the ankles, and folded his hands in his lap. And now he looked about him as if for the first time. 'Amazing,' he thought: 'I've never really

looked at it this way before.' He tilted his head to the right, just as Storm had done. 'Funny,' he thought, 'I've never really looked at it this way before, either.' Held it straight again, and then tilted it to the left. 'Nor this way,' he thought. And he felt himself smiling as he sat there under the Christmas tree, his cheek resting almost on his shoulder.

"What are you doing?" said a voice.

Belthar sat upright, straight and to attention and pulled his legs in and lifted his head and removed his smile. "Nothing," he snapped.

"You had your head all funny," said the voice.

He turned to look at his accuser. A child of about ten, he supposed, with scraped and wrinkled knees and a dirty, suntanned vest and a dirty, suntanned face.

"Nothing wrong with my head."

She laughed. "Yes you did, you had your head all funny!"

"Never been laughed at by a ten year old."

"I'm not ten. I'm eleven," she said, with emphasis, offended.

"Why are you bothering me?"

"You Belthar?"

"Belthar?" He nodded. "Yes."

"They sent me with a message. You Belthar?"

"I told you, yes."

"They said you mustn't wait for Storm."

"Mustn't?"

"Storm. My auntie. They said she's gone to the hospital to have her baby. They said she's giving me a cousin."

Belthar didn't know if there was a customary greeting for a child who was soon to become a cousin, so he simply nodded again, stood and turned to walk into the library.

The girl watched him go with her head tilted to the right, holding it just like a puppy. Or like Belthar.

6. Chrysanthemoides monilifera

After he'd chosen his books, Belthar left the library and walked out again onto the patio and sat down on the bench. The child wasn't there. He tried to decide whether it would be appropriate to take something to the new mother. He wondered if the nurses would allow him to see her to deliver his present; if the husband would be jealous; if Storm would have to remain in the hospital for long. And shortly, with the heat of the afternoon, his eyes began to close and his chin sank onto his chest, and he slept a while, his hands hanging limply in his lap, his basket unattended.

The spring air cooled quickly when the sun began to slide behind the mountains and the cold woke Belthar and he opened his eyes, struggling to understand where he was. 'Sleeping on a park bench. Never done that before,' he thought.

At first he was angry with himself for wasting time, but it came to him that he hadn't anything scheduled for the day, other than his failed appointment with Storm, and that, although his neck was a little stiff, he felt quite relaxed and content.

'Strange afternoon,' he thought.

He stood and stretched and took up the handle of his basket and walked out onto the square. He felt oddly detached, but it wasn't unpleasant, and it made him aware that he also felt benign and kindly towards the world. And he didn't often feel like that.

He turned to his left and walked out onto Main Street and then turned left once more and walked through the arcade and through to the parking lot in front of the nursery.

A woman he hadn't seen before sat at the desk. "We're closing," she said.

Ordinarily he would have turned and gone meekly away, but Belthar was in too good a mood. "I'm here to buy a present," he said. "Do you know Storm?"

"Yes, of course. She's my sister. This is her nursery."

He looked outside, and there, playing on a pile of compost near the back of the lot, he saw the child. She had a little dog with her and they were digging together furiously. Her shrieks and laughter and the dog's high pitched yapping sparkled like fireworks across the noise of the traffic in the evening's growing rush hour.

"That little girl came to tell me that Storm had gone into hospital to have her baby."

"You're Belthar!" cried the woman, smiling and tilting her head just as Storm and the child had done.

'Must be genetic,' he thought.

"Storm talks a lot about you. She's very fond of you," she said.

"Hardly know her," said Belthar. "Met her twice."

"Well you must have made quite an impression." Suddenly she turned to the back door and yelled: "Peanut! Come here and say hello to Belthar."

"Peanut?"

"My daughter," said the woman. "Her real name's Mystery, but we prefer Peanut."

The child and the dog came running together in a tangle of limbs and fur. "He does funny things with his head," she said as she tumbled into the shop.

"Hello, Mystery," said Belthar.

The child laughed. "Nobody calls me Mystery. I'm Peanut."

Belthar had never heard of anyone called Mystery, or Peanut. Or even Storm, for that matter. Perhaps these people followed some pagan religion. Although he wasn't a church-going man, Belthar was strictly Protestant, himself, and he had no sympathy for Romanists.

"Peanut can help you choose something while I cash up," said the woman. "She knows most of the plants."

"Didn't know if I was going to get her a plant," said Belthar.

"'Course you're going to get her a plant. Anything else would mean nothing to Storm."

Peanut was already outside in the nursery, her head tilted, waiting for him to follow. "Storm likes yellow," she said as she lead him along a spongy pathway. She stopped before a row of shrubs with daisy-shaped flowers and leathery, grass-green leaves covered in white silky down.

He read the label. "The bush tick berry?" he asked.

"Storm's best," said the child. He nodded and she tilted her head, looking at the rows of plants and deciding which one to choose for him. To Belthar they all looked the same and just as untidy as they were before.

"This one'll do you," she said, just like her aunt. "Will we find a pot for it?"

"It's in a pot already," said Belthar.

She laughed. "No, silly, this's a bag. You have to have a nice pot," and, concentrating hard and carrying the shrub in both hands - it was too big for her and she had to walk by swinging her legs out sideways - she lead him back to the shop. To one side of the back door stood a shade house filled with wooden racks which held a confusing collection of pots: ceramic pots, terracotta pots, porcelain pots, wooden pots, plastic pots.

The woman came out to help them and they chose a simple, traditional terracotta container and she took it and the plant to the potting bench with its pile of dark, ready-mixed, sweet-smelling compost. She tore the plastic bag away and quickly replanted the shrub in its new container. She tamped down the soil, wiped the pot with an old rag and teased the leaves upwards to settle them into shape. "I'll just wrap it in some cellophane for you," she said, "and I think it needs a big bow. I won't water it now because it'll mess all over the place, so you'll have to water it when you get to the hospital."

When she'd finished, she held it up for inspection. The bow was broad and deep and green and the cellophane shone. 'Looks nice,' he thought, and nodded.

She worked out the price and he paid and put the newly-wrapped present in his basket. "Which hospital"? he said.

"Storm?" said the woman. "She's in the municipal hospital. Couldn't afford the private one. In the maternity ward, on the ground floor. Do you want to go there? We're going straight away. You c'n have a lift with us, if you like."

Belthar stammered. He'd never accept a lift from a stranger.

"But we're not strangers," said the woman. "I'm Storm's sister."

"Don't know your name," he said.

"Jill," she said. "Hang on outside with Peanut while I lock up and then we can go."

Belthar felt bullied, but he knew it would be rude to refuse.

'Jill,' he thought. 'With a child called Peanut. They must be pagans.'

7. Helianthus anuus

The car was old and rusty and smelled of dogs and children and the things they took to the beach. Belthar sat awkwardly on the passenger seat, his basket at his feet. It was a short drive to the hospital, and the child chatted to her dog all the way, telling it about her day at school and how she'd been to meet Belthar and talking to it as if it would reply - if ever she allowed it a chance. But even the most experienced speaker would have struggled to interrupt her flow.

Jill glanced back at her and then looked at Belthar and shrugged her shoulders and smiled.

"Never stops," she said.

The hospital was a long, three-storied building with a sweeping view of the Lagoon. Its white-painted walls were broken by rows of windows in heavy steel-green frames, lit now against the coming darkness of the night.

At the door, a guard asked them where they were going. "Maternity," said Jill.

"How old is the girl?" asked the guard.

"'Leven," said Peanut.

"I'm afraid she can't go into the maternity ward, ma'am," he said. "That's regulations. No one under sixteen."

"But she's giving me a cousin," said Peanut.

"Sorry ma'am," and the guard looked at Jill imploringly, terrified that he might have to argue with the child.

"You go ahead, Belthar," said Jill. "I'll take her home; it's just around the corner. Back in ten minutes."

The guard waved Belthar past a steel security gate, open now for the visiting hour. "Maternity's through the last double doors," he said.

And once through the double doors, Belthar passed from the white enamel and beige floors and stainless steel of the hospital's main passage and into a brightly painted, cartoon-filled nurses' station which lead onto two gaudily coloured wards.

'Never seen anything like it,' he thought as he took up a position at the counter and waited for someone to tell him what to do. 'Not exactly antiseptic with all these colours.'

At last a vastly smiling and vastly overweight, matronly woman appeared from one of the wards. "Help you?" she asked.

"Storm," he said. "Can I see her?"

"She's in the yellow room, third bed on the left. You her father? The grandfather?"

Belthar hesitated. Would she throw him out if he said he wasn't?

"The grandfather then," said the nurse. "But you're welcome anyway. She's a sweetheart and it isn't right that she hasn't had any visitors yet. Baby's four hours old, already," and she pointed the way. "There you go. But don't tell anyone I said you could, OK? You just walked in because you're the grandfather, OK?"

Belthar nodded and, still towing his wicker basket, entered the yellow room where huge yellow sunflowers were painted onto the walls. Four of the six beds were occupied, and three of them were surrounded by little groups of proud fathers and happy grandparents, some standing, some sitting by the new mothers on their beds. But the third bed on the left stood alone, its occupant staring and smiling at her child in the steel and plastic crib beside her.

Belthar thought Storm looked tired, but very, very happy. She wore a blue night dress, bright T-shirt material, and her naked arms rested on the blankets. She looked warm and alive and Belthar realised that now that the baby was born there was something else about her, something he'd never noticed in a woman before. He'd nursed his mother himself in her final years so it wasn't as if he didn't know anything about the workings of the female body: his mother had been frail in her bed and her nighties had been feminine, white or cream and printed with pink roses and iced with lace at the cuffs and tiny satin bows at the neckline. But here was a woman alive. Even through her exhaustion, she filled her bed with life and it was almost as though he could feel her heart beating from where he stood and it felt animal and wild and he was scared and he wanted to leave.

'Can't go now,' he thought and took the plant out of his basket and coughed. She turned to him, and her face lit and she said, "Belthar! You came! I'm so pleased you came. And you brought

me a bitou. Thank you. And look at him," she said, pointing at the crib. "Isn't he perfect, don't you want to hold him?"

Belthar approached the crib, the pot still in his hand. He didn't know where to put it and he certainly didn't want to touch the tiny, fragile child. Its eyes were tight shut and he was scared of waking it.

"Never held a baby," he said.

Storm reached up and pressed a switch and a bell buzzed dull and off-key in the nurses' station. Belthar held the pot like a shield in front of him. He was numb with fear.

The nurse arrived almost immediately. "Yes, dear?"

"Please help Belthar to hold my baby," asked Storm. "And could you relieve him of his pot?"

The nurse laughed, her enormous chest shaking grandly. She took the plant from Belthar and stood it on the narrow, wheeled hospital table which arched over the bed. "He's never held a baby before," said Storm.

The nurse reached into the crib, her huge arms and heavy hands making the little bundle of blankets and baby seem even smaller, and, cradling the child's head in her palm, picked him up expertly and gently. "Here," she said, showing Belthar how to support him and handing him over to the old man.

Belthar stood, rigid and unblinking. He couldn't stop looking at the child in his arms. 'It's wonderful,' he thought. 'Better not move or I'll drop it.'

Storm and the nurse smiled at his discomfort, but he knew nothing of them. He was absorbed and remained silent for many minutes. He was faintly aware of the new-born smell of the baby, and, as if in the distance, of snatches of conversation from the other family groups in the ward.

He was completely in awe.

At last he spoke. "He's so perfect," he said. "So perfect."

8. Sideroxylon inerme

On the morning after the baby's birth, Belthar began repairing his fence.

It was no ordinary fence, although it might once have been. Over the years he'd patched it and put it together so often that it had become a magnificent collection of chicken mesh of various sizes, of sticks and planks and, in some places, of tarred poles, faded now and greened with moss. Its job was to keep the forest out, for although Belthar's suburb had been built into the forest - and many of his neighbours took pride in that - Belthar had always hated the trees which surrounded him, with their leaves and their mess and their smell. And he reserved his particular dislike for the twisted, ancient milkwoods which stank of rotten meat when their tiny, creamy flowers bloomed in summer.

And with the trees came the animals - the bushbuck and the blue duiker, the monkeys and sometimes even the baboons.

'You don't want to encourage the monkeys or the baboons,' he thought as he pulled at the splintered wood and at the broken, folded wire.

He soon fell into a rhythm of carefully removing each piece from the twisted puzzle and straightening it if he could and placing it on its correct pile: chicken wire, spanning wire or wood. It was easy work and repetitive - pull out, cut away, straighten and stack - and his mind began to wander backwards.

He thought of his mother - he'd scarcely known his father, who'd worked for the government, died in an industrial accident and left his widow a pension which had been just about enough to raise their only child in relative comfort. But with his mother's inability (or refusal) to find work to supplement her income, it was a diminished comfort. Whilst other houses in the street were entered - via their kitchen doors, of course - every morning at seven by their domestic servants, Belthar's mother's house remained unsullied ("I'm quite capable of doing for myself, thank you. And I don't need black people around the house, stealing my sugar and going through my things"). And when the other families in the neighbourhood locked up their homes and moved to their beach shacks for their summer holidays at Christmastime, Belthar and his mother stayed at home, his mother a little dismissive of their neighbours' decadence ("It's a fine house we have here, Belthar, a fine house. Why should we lower our standards just because it's summer?"). But through it all his mother was able to keep up the appearance of a "proper, solid, middle class home," which, she often said, was everything she had ever aspired to do - although Belthar knew that she would have preferred to have had the money and privileges and comforts which her parents must have had. And while it seemed to him that her pronouncements on the lives of their neighbours were touched with jealousy, he never thought of her as bitter. And if she was, she was too kind to him ever to have shown it. Because she may have been strict and she may have been severe, but Belthar recognised this: that even though she couldn't always afford it, she was always (but often in strange ways) very, very kind.

And so they'd lived a life of ordered correctness, with occasional tea parties and even more occasional dinners at which the ladies discussed the church bazaar and the troubles they had with their servants.

Although he'd been a solitary child, Belthar had never considered himself lonely or different. But he was different. He did different things. In summer when his schoolmates and their families were away at the beach, he would go out and climb over the fence and follow one of the game paths which weaved through the dark of the forests behind their house, hurrying scared 'til he came out onto the sun-washed, heath-covered hills on the other side. And there he would wonder alone, sometimes as far as the cliffs on the ocean side, where he liked to lie and rest and stare. Or he would ride his bicycle down to the banks of the Lagoon where he would paddle up to his knees in the clear, cool, salty water.

And he was always there at the simple concrete jetty of the town's tiny harbour whenever the little coastal steamer came in - it arrived fortnightly with the spring tide - so that he became a landmark to the sailors as he stood solemnly, his hands tight behind his back, watching silent and grave as the ship was docked and the gangplank came down for the passengers. And whilst he never spoke to anybody on the quayside, he made enough impression that the sailors - who often wondered about the little boy in his old-fashioned shorts and neatly ironed shirts - became fond of him and began to think of him as their mascot, his predictable presence a comforting sign that they'd

once again safely crossed the dangerous bar at the mouth of this deceptively quiet and peaceful Lagoon.

When the foresters sold their crop of expensive timber in the spring and autumn of every year, Belthar would go to the government yard to watch the auctions. The forests of the area had once been harvested mercilessly - but when it had been realised that they wouldn't last forever, allotments had been created and the old woodcutting families had been rooted out from their hovels in the shade and resettled in new hovels in the sun, where, well watered with cheap liquor, they'd quickly withered and died. Then with the woodcutters out of the way, the timber was managed scientifically, and now - and ever since Belthar had been a boy - only tiny amounts of the precious raw wood were released onto the market each season. Prices reached record levels again and again, and that made the auctions prestigious indeed. Dressed in their business best and carrying numbered white cards, the cabinetmakers, merchants, agents and speculators milled around, looking as though they were enjoying a jolly good time as they calculated how many useable planks they could wrestle from each numbered tree-trunk in each numbered pile. Stinkwood, assegai, yellowwood, cape ash and beech - the names were as familiar to Belthar as the smell of sawdust and expensive tobacco smoke and diesel. It was satisfying to him that out of the chaos of the forest, the logs would be sawn up and the planks placed neatly on one pile, the sawdust neatly on another.

The people behind the drama, though, were of no interest to him. They were removed from him, foreign as the actors in the movies he sometimes watched in the once opulent, now crumbling bioscope.

Sometimes, too, one of the men who had known and worked with his father would greet him but all they ever got in return was a polite "Hello" and a silent stare, and as the years passed these greetings became scarcer and quieter, a curt nod or a half raised hand.

In later life, the adults would recall that Belthar had never been seen in the company of other children. He'd found them unnecessary, they'd say. But in fact he'd found them intrusive and although he'd sometimes been bullied, he quickly learned that stolid silence was a fine defence, and when his tormentors themselves realised that they couldn't make him cry, couldn't make him fight back at them - not even with words - they'd left him alone at the edges of their circle, at the edges of the play ground, at edges of the schoolroom. At the edges of their lives.

But now, as he twisted the broken pieces of his fence into shape, as he sorted them into piles, he suddenly found himself angry. His hands shook as he worked and he had to sit down to regain himself. He threw his pliers onto the grass, turned and stomped to his patio and threw himself onto his bench to wait for its rocking to soothe him. He began to push violently and the swing swayed alarmingly against the old beam from which it hung. But instead of soothing him, the rushing in his ears and the rushing of the landscape as it neared and zoomed away made him angrier and angrier still. Unconsciously, he began to wring his hands, his knitted fingers rubbing, rubbing against each another. His eyes hurt, and he wiped savagely at the pricking heat from his tears. His hands were rough and dirty and they scratched at his cheeks as he wiped, but he didn't care.

He stood up again and sat down again and again and again.

He'd never thought about his feelings before, but now he found them unavoidable.

Why was he feeling like this? Why? Why?

In disgust he returned to his fence. He looked at the neat piles of junk that he'd built, he looked at the sections that hadn't been damaged by his tree and he looked at the gaping hole between himself and the forest.

"Forget it," he said, aloud, surprising himself and suddenly no longer angry. "Let the forest look after itself." And he turned away and went inside to prepare his tea.

9. Carissa bispinosa

Storm named her new baby on the spring equinox, and she asked Belthar to the party. “Don’t worry about dressing up,” she had said. “Just come as you are. We’re going into the forest for a picnic and we’ll have the ceremony by the river.”

Belthar couldn’t remember when last he’d been invited to a party and he’d certainly never been to a party in a forest. He had to look up spring equinox - his dictionary said it was on March 21, and he puzzled over why she would wait half a year before naming her child. He called Storm on the phone and she laughed in her maddening way and said, “You must have an American dictionary. I’m talking about the spring equinox in the Southern Hemisphere, silly.”

His silence gave his ignorance away. “Belthar!” she laughed again. “It’s on September the twenty third. You’ll come with us. We’ll pick you up at ten.”

And now it was past eight in the morning and she would be here in less than two hours and again he was fussing over what to wear.

Retirement was still strange to him and he found himself resentful that he was forced to create a new schedule for himself and even more resentful that he had to think of new ways of dressing himself. A nursery and a party in a forest: he’d never planned to visit a nursery nor had he ever planned to attend a party in a forest, and he found himself angry at Storm. And not for the first time, either. She was pushy. She laughed at him. She made him do things that he wouldn’t ordinarily have done.

Who did she think she was?

In spite of his irritation, he took his usual care about choosing his clothes. Of course he would go to the naming ceremony and of course he would be polite while he was there (his mother had taught him that once he’d agreed to an arrangement, it would be unthinkably rude to withdraw). And because it was Storm it would seem even ruder if he didn’t seem to be enjoying himself. But why couldn’t the child have a simple church baptism like he had had - church baptisms were good enough for everyone else, Jew and Gentile alike, so why weren’t they good enough for Storm?

And why had she ... why had this irritating, irritating woman chosen to ... to irritate him like this?

He took a pair of dark blue pants from their hangar in the pants section of his cupboard and dropped them onto his bed. He unfolded a neatly pressed white shirt from the correct shelf (shirts were kept below the handkerchief rack and above the underwear), chose a thin, brown, knitted tie from the left hand side of his tie rack (dark colours to the left, lighter to the right), took a pair of matching socks from his sock drawer and pulled his tweed sports jacket off its hangar and then he dressed and went into his sitting room to wait.

His mother’s furniture was heavy with age, all made by hand by craftsmen whom she had personally known (“Good, working class stock, Belthar, salt of the earth people”) and it sat on its ball-and-claw feet like a brood of smug, overweight, self-satisfied and slightly threadbare old crows. A three division couch and three armchairs stood at angles to each other, awkwardly facing the low table where the old woman had liked to serve drinks to her visitors (although she and Belthar, when they were alone, always took their tea in the kitchen. “Not quite form, but so much easier, Belthar”).

The wood was black and dull with furniture oil and smooth to the touch, smooth as the soft, warm comfort of the brown velvet cushion which he stroked, the nap now flowing and now grainy against the flat of his hand.

And sitting stiffly and formally in the lounge where he had grown up and grown old, he found himself, for the first time, he thought, listening to the life around him.

He jumped as a flight of hadedas, which had been pecking deep into his lawn all morning, lifted noisily into the air, their duh-duh-daaahhs ringing loud and intrusive and unforgiving as church bells, frightening everything else into silence.

The early spring sunlight caught the leaves and the trees fluttered as they swayed on the breath of a breeze. Far away and across in the valley where the teenagers had their motocross course, a bike roared into life and began its intrusive buzzing - a sound which should have angered Belthar, although today...

He struggled to open his eyes and to understand what was happening as she softly, softly stroked his cheek with the back of her hand. “Wake up sleepy head,” she said, as if to a child. “Wake up.”

“Hm?”

“Wake up, Belthar. We’re here to collect you. Are you OK? You fell asleep.”

“I was waiting for you. I fell asleep.”

“I know,” she laughed, “that’s what I said.”

“You look pretty,” he said, surprising himself again. She had on a plain, pale dress down to her ankles and a simple white T-shirt. Her hair was braided with white flowers like stars and a suggestion of make-up punctuated the loveliness of her face. She held the baby against her shoulder, which she’d covered with a blanket decorated with teddy bears. The baby wasn’t in a christening dress and neither, thought Belthar, was Storm.

“You’re very formal,” she said, as they made their way to the gate.

“Overdressed?” he said.

“No, but you really don’t need a tie. Won’t you take it off? You’ll be more comfortable.”

“You always wear a tie to a function like this. And I’m wearing a jacket.”

“We’re not doing it in a church, Belthar. We don’t go to church.”

He stopped and looked at her, confused. “This is a naming ceremony,” she said. “It’s more like a party. You’ll feel better without the tie. And it’s OK to wear a jacket without a tie.”

‘So they are pagans,’ he thought. He turned and started walking up the path back to the house. “Alright,” he said. “But just wait while I put it away.”

“But you can leave it in the car.”

“No, I have to hang it up.” And he looked over his shoulder as he went in and there she was, watching him with her head tilted to one side.

10. Stenotaphrum secundatum

Storm strapped the baby into a carrying seat that was strapped onto the back seat of the car; he was sleeping gently and she worked expertly and he didn't stir at all.

Belthar recognised the car as Jill's and he'd have thought it would have been cleaned for the occasion, but it was still a mess of children and dogs. "Where's your sister?" he said.

"She got a lift with one of the others so that I could pick you up," said Storm. "Also I didn't want anybody driving me there today, not with the baby and everything." She was talking quietly so as not to disturb the child and Belthar had to strain to hear her over the noise of the road so he turned and stared out of the window and they drove that way in comfortable silence.

Although he'd often been a passenger Belthar hadn't driven himself since the day after his mother's funeral, when he'd taken his father's old Chevrolet to a second-hand dealer and left it there to be sold. It had been uncomfortably large and it had rusted and with the old woman gone he didn't need it anymore - and besides, it reminded him of her, always seeking attention, always wanting cleaning.

Storm drove erratically but slowly and Belthar felt safe enough and he let his mind wander as they skirted the edge of the Lagoon, the sparkle on the water hypnotic as fire. They left the town behind them and crossed the bridge at the headwaters and a little further on, turned right off the broad national road and onto a narrow strip of tar that wound inland through open grassy fields. Soon they crested a plateau and ahead of them lay the mountains with their dark skirt of forest. Belthar ignored the cows at the cud and the horses at the fences, ignored the beauty of the day, the sky's perfect glassiness, the gold on the light where the sun reflected off the lily-lined dams that spread like a necklace over the lands.

Ahead of them, at the edge of the plateau, the lower slopes were carpeted with trees, the crags especially thick where the buttresses of the mountains shaded them from the sun until late in the day.

Belthar looked at the unbroken forests and felt his stomach tighten and a panic begin to rise. This was infinity; this was endlessness, the going on and on forever, the monotonous sameness over every hill and into every valley, stretching and stretching and stretching and suddenly he shouted "Stop!"

Storm slammed her foot onto the brake and they jerked forward against their seat belts and backwards again and the baby began to cry. "What's wrong? Are you car sick?"

Belthar had surprised himself and didn't know what to say, shook his head and patted his hands on his knees, nervously and quickly while he looked at her.

"What's wrong?" she said again. She pulled the car onto the dirt at the side of the road and turned to the baby and stroked his stomach until he calmed.

"What's wrong, Belthar?"

"Nothing. I'm sorry. I... Just thinking aloud."

"About what?"

But all he could do was sit there, shaking his head and patting his knees.

She started the car again. "Are you sure you aren't car sick? Should I carry on or do you want to get out for a while and get some air?"

"Go," he said. "I'll open the window."

She drove even more slowly now, glancing at him again and again.

They passed into a pine plantation and then the road dipped towards a river and on the other side they came into a village with a sawmill and a general dealers and an intimate restaurant in someone's home and six or seven low, spreading houses surrounded by horse fences and shaded by oak trees and Storm said, "It's oh, so very English isn't it?" - but Belthar and the baby stayed silent.

After the village they turned right onto a sand road, the bushes and the grass and the road dusted the same dirty brown, and then through a clearing filled with the wooden houses of the forestry workers and Storm said, "It's amazing; they haven't got any trees."

But they did have trees: past the clearing and into the sudden green gloom they had thousands of trees, millions of them, and as they entered them a road sign that said "Turn On Your Headlights Now."

Here, where the sun never reached the ground, the road was less dusty and there was a smell of compost and mould. Belthar watched as the trunks of the trees flashed past like pictures in a movie, trunks that were grey and black and green with moss, a strange feeling that it was the forest that was moving and not the car.

Sometimes he heard sounds over the noisy rattle, bird sounds, he supposed, and once he caught a flash of red as a loerie showed its under-wings in a harried glide across the road.

Storm gasped at the beauty, but Belthar said nothing and the road narrowed onto a single-carriage bridge with high stone parapets. The water in the river below was black and impenetrable as all the water in these forests and where it bubbled up against the rocks it made a rich foam like cream on coffee. Here they could see the sky, thin slices of blue where the trees made way for the stream.

Over the river they came into the forest again and here, on the drier slope, the stems stood further apart, the trunks thinner, less under-bush between them, the canopy a little more open to the light. But the road wound quickly back into the shade and Belthar noticed a number of fallen logs and their hard, plate-shaped bracket fungi and he remembered his mother - "Decay, Belthar. Decay. Fungi and mushrooms cause decay" - and he thought 'that must have been the only piece of natural history she ever taught me.

'I wonder if that was all she knew?'

The road narrowed again and Storm drove slower still and Belthar realised that they were following a contour across very steeply sloping ground. For a moment he wondered what would happen if another vehicle came from the other direction, whether either one would be able to stop and how they'd pass each other, but the thought was quickly buried in the oppression of the trees.

Although it was mid-morning and light enough, he found it almost impossible to see beyond the canopy and he leaned forward and put his head out of the window and looked up.

"Thick, isn't it?" said Storm.

Belthar leaned back against his seat. "Can't see the sky."

"I know, isn't it brilliant?"

"It's dark," he said.

They drove this way for the longest while, saw a dozen signs that pointed to picnic spots and cycle routes and hiking trails but never another car or another person until at last they entered a little clearing - the foresters call them islands - where a buffalo-grass lawn and a shallow, bright, pebbly stream lay peaceful under the warm September sun.

And without the trees above them it was suddenly and abruptly spring again, with minibuses and pick-ups parked in the shade and a group of hippies lounging around on blankets by the stream. The only furniture Belthar could see was a single, foldable canvas chair and a table that was covered with striped kikois, yellow and black, blue and red, orange and grey and stacked with heavy bowls of salad, gaudy yellow and orange packets of crisps, strong and stodgy home-made breads, unmatched plates and cutlery and a mix of wine bottles and cool drinks and glasses.

Storm parked the car and got out and stood up and shouted "Everybody, this is Belthar!" and then opened the baby's door and clicked the belt to release the carry seat, the child awake and smiling, his hands waving straight-fingered like babies do.

Belthar had sat for too long and his back and his knees were stiff and he had to push himself to get up out of the car and he staggered a little as he walked towards the group, unfolding his spine as he went.

They were all looking at him and watching his progress and he turned and waited for Storm to catch up with him. "Don't know any of them," he said.

"You know Jill and Peanut and you know me."

They all greeted them, much nodding of heads, and some of them told him their names, which he forgot, and he shook their hands in his formal, distant way. The children were playing in the brown, forest-stained stream, their shrieks echoing off the trees, and a teenage couple sat holding hands on the bank.

One of the men asked what Belthar would like to drink, brought him an orange juice in a wine glass and then ushered him into the chair. "Storm said you'd be uncomfortable on the ground."

Storm herself sat on a blanket and covered the baby with a towel and let him suckle. She wasn't very discreet about it and Belthar could see the edge of her breast and he looked quickly away, horrified and embarrassed.

After the feed, she held the child against her chest with his head over her shoulder and patted his bum for a while while he cried and then when he'd burped, lay him on the towel and removed his nappy and wiped him and cleaned him. He gave off a strong, sharp smell and his nappy was full and Belthar couldn't help looking although he thought 'why can't she go and do that in the toilet?' although none of the others seemed much concerned.

In fact, when he looked more closely, it seemed that none of the adults cared about what the children were doing at all; no one disciplining any of them, no one worrying about their safety, no one scolding or guiding them.

When the baby was dry and his crying had stopped, Storm stood up and waved her free hand towards herself and called "OK, everyone, let's do it! C'mon kids, pull in! It's your job to choose the name."

Belthar stood and came closer with everyone else. When they'd all gathered, adults behind and children in front, Storm said, "OK, my friends, here's how we're going to do it.

"I've chosen a whole lot of names for this baby, and now the kids here have to make the final decision. I've painted the names on these pebbles and Rudi's going to throw them into the water for me. Then the children must go in and treasure hunt them, and the first one they find, that'll be the name."

"Brilliant idea!" said one of the women.

But Belthar stood appalled. 'This isn't a naming ceremony,' he thought. 'I knew they were pagans.'

Rudi picked up a canvas bank bag from the edge of the water and pulled out a pebble and read the name she'd written on it with a black Koki pen. "Thomas," he said, and tossed the stone into the water. It splashed and rolled in amongst the others in the stream and was lost to site immediately. Then he took another and read "River" and then "Sean" and "Connor" and "Light" ('my god!' thought Belthar. 'They can't call a child 'Light'!').

Each name drew a reaction from someone in the crowd. When Rudi read "Dale," a woman said "that's the one!" and when he read "Thorn" someone else shouted "No way!"

"Carter!"

"Ariel!"

"Simon!"

"Crallon!"

"Alder!" ("But that's a tree," said one of the girls. "Precisely," said Storm).

"Peter!"

And, finally "Willow!" and Belthar shook his head and thought 'this can't be happening. They can't name a child Willow. They can't name a child like this. They need a priest. This is blasphemy.'

Storm held her baby under his arms and lifted him up for everyone to see. "Fourteen names," she said. "Which one do you prefer?" and everyone laughed.

Then Rudi shouted, "Go on, kids! Find the stone!" and the children - there were eight of them, including Peanut - ran and tumbled into the stream and began picking up pebbles and turning them over. They worked in silence, splashing and shoving, falling on the slippery bottom, quick and wild, nature children used to the water.

Storm held the baby up so that he could see the action and suddenly one of the children shot his hand into the air and cried "I've got one!"

"Read it," said Rudi.

The child frowned down at the stone in his hand, a young child in his first year of reading, trying to mouth the word. The group was silent as he struggled and he was nervous and he pursed his lips as he tried to understand what he was looking at and Rudi said, "Can I help you?"

But Belthar, surprising himself for a second time, said, "No, pass it to me."

Rudi looked at Storm and she nodded and he turned to the child and said, "Give it to the uncle."

Blond and serious, with long, curly hair tussled across his face, the boy came dripping out of the water and walked to Belthar with the stone held out in front of him, cradled like a treasure in his palms.

Belthar nodded gravely and said, "Thank you," formally, as if he was receiving a medal, and then he looked at the stone and looked at Storm and said, "River. Your baby's name is River."

11. Virgilia oroboides

They all clapped and cheered and tried it out - “River,” “River” - and Storm came across to Belthar and stroked his cheek and said, “Thank you.”

Rudi was a cabinetmaker with a rough face and heavy hands but he had a sweet voice and he collected his guitar from his truck and came back and sat on the grass and strummed and sang for them, making up a piece about River and how his light would shine and his life would be long and happy, and then turning to the old folk songs, Joan Baez and Woody Guthrie, working men’s songs about love and travelling, peace trains and hardship.

The women took the covers off the food and the men helped each other to the wine and everyone lined up and piled their plates with lentils and tomatoes, cheese and lettuce, sprouts and cauliflower and potatoes coated with olive oil and garlic.

Some of them sat with their plates in their laps and others lay down on their sides and ate with one hand and Belthar sat on his chair, a napkin spread out over his trousers, and, uncomfortable without a table, struggled with the unusual food.

A desert was served - gobs of half-melted ice cream over a fresh and syrupy fruit salad that tasted only of bananas - and then everyone helped to clean up and tidy away and some of them lay on the ground to smoke and others began to leave.

Storm and Belthar and River stayed with Jill and Peanut and Rudi and Rudi’s girlfriend, Helen, for a while after everyone had gone, the baby sleeping in his carry chair, covered now with a blanket against the chill, and Jill congratulated her sister on the ceremony. “And you?” she said to Belthar. “You were amazing.”

“Didn’t do anything. The boy couldn’t read.”

“She’s right, though,” said Helen. “It was very ... appropriate, what you did.”

But Belthar said nothing.

It was getting cooler and Storm said she needed to get the baby home.

“He’s not ‘the baby’ anymore,” said Jill. “He’s River, remember?” and they laughed and picked themselves up off the ground and Rudi folded Belthar’s chair and they made their way back to their cars.

Belthar began to feel heavy as soon as they drove out of the clearing and into the trees and he fell asleep under the weight of it and slept until Storm woke him as she was pulling up to his gate.

He was nauseous and tired and disoriented, and at first it was difficult to move.

“Wait,” said Storm, and she brought River out of the car and came round to Belthar’s side and held out her free arm for him. “I’ll walk you in.” And Belthar was too tired to argue.

They went into his house and he went into his bedroom to lie down.

“I’ll just make some tea,” she said.

The first ache hit him as he lifted his arm to undo the button on his jacket. He slumped backwards onto his bed, his hands working at his chest as he felt his breath leaving him and he gave in to the sweat and the heat and the pain. He dropped onto the cushions and fumbled for the water jug on his table and watched in helpless panic as it fell to the ground with a tinkering shatter.

Frustrated and sore, he began to weep.

The noise brought Storm running from the sitting room, the child in her arm, the first woman to enter his bedroom since his mother had died.

She knew at once that he’d had a heart attack.

“Oh Jesus, Belthar,” she whispered, and River started to cry as she tore at the old man’s shirt and opened his belt with one hand. “Jesus, Belthar. Jesus, Jesus. Lie still. I’ll call an ambulance,” and she dialled with the handset between her shoulder and her ear and then while she waited for them to answer she fought with one hand to pull the counterpane from under him and cover him. “Jesus, Belthar.”

“Leave me, Storm. Your baby needs you...”

“Are you mad?”

“Leave me.”

The white of the ambulance, the red of the paramedics’ uniforms, the white of the hospital corridors, the red of the blanket, the white of her T-shirt as she ran along beside him. And at last the darkness which descended as the doctors sedated him and he relaxed into blackness.

And then the gentle green glow of the lights in the ward when he woke. The blip, blip of a monitor monotonous in the quiet rhythm of the night. And then when he woke again the daylight and a doctor reading his chart, and then later again a nurse washing him with a sponge.

And each time he looked for Storm, for the tilt of her head, for her baby and his toothless smile. But she wasn't there and finally as they pronounced him safe and wheeled him out of high care and into the general ward, he felt the tears overflow as he convinced himself that she wouldn't ever be there again.

The nurse wiped his cheeks with a corner of his sheet and, kindly as she could, said, "It's OK. You're going to be OK. There's no more danger, the doctor said.

"You're over the worst."

But she was wrong.

He lay unmoving under the covers, staring at the pale pink mist of the flowers on the trees beyond the ward's single window. And at last his tears dried, just as his feelings had dried; he'd survived and he was angry for that, and his anger was dull and uncomplaining and he found that, beyond it, he had no emotions at all.

It was all he could do to lie there, just staring at the blossoms.

12. Calodendrum capense

She came into the ward shortly before lunch. It wasn't visiting hour but she'd carried her baby past the guard at the front door, carried him as if she'd brought him here on hospital business and he hadn't tried to stop her.

Belthar didn't see them at first and she approached his bed slowly, enjoying the moment: he was alive and that was enough. She thought she'd never been so scared as when she'd sat watching him during the long hours of the night, willing him to get better but hopeless and unable to do anything except hope.

"Hello, Belthar."

He ignored her but she remained where she stood, just looking at him. A nurse put her head around the door and, seeing Storm, said "You're not supposed to be here, you know." Like all the staff on the ward, though, she presumed that the young woman who had spent so much time at his bedside must be Belthar's daughter, and that this was his grandchild, and she thought that to separate them now would be cruel no matter what the regulations required.

Storm smiled at her and turned back to the man in the bed. His skin, which had only three days ago seemed so healthy, was now pale and thin, worsened by the untidy grey of the stubble on his face and by the greasy grey of his mussed and thinning hair.

Still she stood and waited, gently rocking River in her arms, and it was at least ten minutes before he spoke. "You came," he said.

"I was here all along."

"I looked for you. You weren't here." His voice was flat and lifeless.

"They made me leave every time the doctors wanted to examine you," she said.

He turned back to the window. "It doesn't matter."

"It does, Belthar. It does. That's why I was here."

The silence dragged between them as he struggled to understand, but his mind was slowed by its emptiness. Why hadn't he died? Why? Why live? If she hadn't interfered he'd be dead by now and it would all be over.

She began to talk: "I thought perhaps the best tree for your garden would be a Cape chestnut," she said. "They're lovely with their pink flowers in summer. You like pink flowers, don't you Belthar? I can see you looking at the keurbooms right now." Her voice became louder. "The chestnut's flowers are a lot brighter, of course, and they're a lot more showy, too.

"You need a good shade tree in your garden, and they grow quite quickly if you feed and water them regularly. 'Course they're not so quick in the forests, but in your garden there wouldn't be so much competition.

"You have to plant them with a lot of compost and they enjoy a good mulching, which simulates the forest floor..." and she trailed off when she saw he was crying. "What's wrong?"

He said nothing and made no move to wipe his eyes. His arms lay at his sides and she saw that he was rolling the blanket between his thumb and his forefinger, rolling and rolling and rolling, unaware that he was doing it.

"Are you in pain? Should I get you a nurse? Belthar, are you OK?" She covered his hand to stop the rolling. "What is it, Belthar?"

At last he said, "No pain."

"What is it, then?"

He wished she would go away, but he knew that he was powerless to make her do so. He must just accept whatever happened. "Belthar, talk to me, please!"

She was almost shouting and she jumped as the nurse put a hand on her shoulder. "Come outside, siessie, you shouldn't be here now, visiting hour is only at three." And she guided Storm into the passageway where she gently pushed her onto a bench and took a seat beside her. Now Storm began to cry, too, silent sobs, releasing her fear and her feelings to the nurse's motherly kindness.

The nurse reached for River and took him in her arms and tickled his tummy, the two of them smiling together.

"You're a good daughter, you've been good to your father," said the nurse.

"He isn't my father," said Storm. "He's just a friend."

"An old friend of many years?"

"No. I met him just before my baby was born. He came into my nursery." The nurse looked puzzled. "Plant nursery. I have a plant nursery and he came in to buy a tree."

"This man is the father of your baby?"

Storm laughed. "No, he's just a friend. I don't even know him that well."

"You respect him because of his age?"

"No. No. I mean - no! It's not that. It's just that ... there's something about him. I don't know. But I respect him, of course I respect him."

"It's better that we respect the old people."

"I know, but he's my friend, too, you know?"

"Like your father, but not your father?"

"No, like my friend who won't be my friend."

"You mustn't ignore his tears, siessie."

"Why would I ignore them?"

"He's had a heart attack."

"I know, but it's over now. The doctor said it was only a mild one. She said she was keeping him in high care for observation."

"For him it's only the beginning, but for some it's the end," said the nurse.

"What do you mean?" said Cath.

"Some use it to live and some use it to die, but all of them become sick in their souls." She clucked her tongue. "He's depressed."

"Depressed?" said Storm.

"Depressed," repeated the nurse, "and that's why he needs you." And she handed the baby back to her and waved towards the ward, inviting her to go back in again. "You mustn't talk to him if he doesn't want to talk. Just be with him.

"If you can just be with him until he's ready to talk, if you can do that, siessie, then he'll use it to live."

13. Chondropetalum tectorum

They served lunch: a bland, boring meal offered without hope by a bland, boring orderly who dropped a stainless steel tray with bland, bored disinterest on Belthar's table and moved on without seeing either the patient or the women by his bed or the baby in her arms.

After he'd gone, the nurse came back with a second tray for Storm. "Here, siessie, you need to eat, too," she said as she wheeled the table closer to Belthar and arranged his pillows behind him. He leaned forward without resistance, allowing her to do her work but not helping her, either.

Storm took the tray onto her lap and ate with her free hand. She ignored the thin soup and she ignored the dry and overcooked fish, the boiled cabbage and the mashed potatoes, but she managed to enjoy the sugary canned fruit salad and its thin, runny custard.

Belthar seemed unaware of the food, although she said, "Aren't you hungry? You haven't eaten anything. You must eat, you know."

He wanted to sleep, to escape this infuriating woman who had forced her way into his life without his permission. He wanted to be alone to die.

Belthar had lived his entire life without ever once asking why. Although in his childhood his mother had taken him to church every Sunday and although he'd attended his confirmation classes, he had never had faith to sustain him. He'd gone to the services because his mother said he must and because he'd recognised in her bitter remarks that she'd been forced to accept help from the ladies of its inner circle from time to time - and therefore that it was necessary to repay the kindness by attending the rituals. And he had gone because in those days everyone went to church and because people would have noticed had he not. But in his adulthood he'd found other things to do on Sundays and although he'd offered excuses at first, his absence did, eventually, go unnoticed as the town grew and the congregation shrank.

And now he had nothing and he felt nothing.

There are those who say that depression is a great, overwhelming sadness, but Belthar wasn't sad or angry or even emotional in any way: he was just empty. Empty of reason, empty of spirit, empty even of time as it hung like a disinfectant spray, thick and unseen in the still, stale hospital air.

The pattern of his day was fixed by the demands of his nurses but he was as little interested in them as in the reeds which filled the garden outside his hospital window, sweeping and swaying in the wind.

Memories came and went, confusing in their repetition, always in snatches: a face in a room, a hand on a book, a voice above a crowd. Disjointed, incomplete. He wanted them complete so that he could destroy them and block them out. He wanted to think of nothing. He wanted his mind to be as empty as his heart. But it was no use, wishing it so.

The memories came and went again, came and went again, came and went again and again and again.

"What do you think about, Belthar?" she asked, and he turned to look at her, his face expressionless.

And after a long, long while, he said, "I think about when you'll leave."

14. Rhumora adiantiformis

They kept Belthar for another week, more because the doctors worried about sending him home alone than because he needed to be in hospital. But when Storm promised that she'd "keep an eye on him," they reluctantly agreed to let him go.

On his last morning in the ward, a nurse helped him to dress in the clothes he'd worn on the day of his attack; Storm had taken them home and washed and ironed them and brought them back to wait for him in the cold steel cupboard by his bed.

He sat in the chair by the window staring until it was time to leave.

When Storm arrived she had River in a papoose at her chest and she was carrying a spray of ferns decorated with a single strelitzia flower, delicately orange and mauve and waxy. "For you," she said, "to brighten up your house when you get home."

"You'll be alright, Tata," said the nurse as he shuffled out of the ward, a compliant child going wherever he was told. "Your daughter will look after you well."

"Not my daughter," he said, crossly, and the nurse laughed.

"You have fire in you so I know you're going to be alright," she said. She put her great hand on Storm's shoulder. "This woman is the daughter of your heart. You must allow yourself that. Goodbye, Tata."

And Storm looked back and they smiled at each other as she and Belthar walked slowly down the corridor.

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If Belthar saw that the car had been cleaned for his journey home, he said nothing about it. He resented Storm now and his resentment was becoming impossible to hide and he'd stopped even trying. He wanted to be surly and rude and to feed his anger with his rudeness.

But Storm ignored it.

"We've worked out a schedule for you," she said. "For the next few weeks I'm going to come to your house during the day and Jill will stay with you at night. She can use your mother's old room. Peanut can stay with her father. And the baby? It'll do you good to have him around, and I don't want to be away from him too much, so he'll be there, too, but we'll try to keep him quiet.

"'Course I won't be there all day, I'll have to go off to check on the nursery and stuff, but you'll be resting a lot and I'll try to go when you're asleep. We've spoken to your doctor and she's given us a strict low cholesterol diet for you, but you won't need to worry about cooking 'cause we'll do all of that. You have a phone by your bed, and we'll pre-dial the emergency number in every time one of us leaves, so if anything goes wrong all you'll have to do is press redial. And you won't get bored because we can always go and get you books from the library and you've got your radio and TV."

"No TV," he snapped.

"What? You haven't got a TV? Or you don't want to watch it?"

"I haven't got one."

"Oh, well maybe we can borrow one. Dave at the pawn shop, I'm sure he'll lend you one, maybe even a video machine, if I ask." She looked at him as she drove but he was staring ahead, his mouth drawn and tight.

"Don't you like the movies...?" And she trailed off. "I'm irritating you," she said. "I'm talking too much. I'm sorry. I do that when I'm nervous," and she struggled herself into silence.

-x-

Belthar was appalled when they drove up to his gate. His neat and tidy garden had overgrown itself: the grass was ankle high and it was growing onto the paving and into his fence and the wild cineraria which had replaced his dead cypress was wilted. 'Pity you didn't die, too,' he thought, bitterly.

"Come," she said, gentle and kind. "Here, I've still got your key from when the ambulance came."

The smell of age hit her as she lead him into the house, a smell she hadn't noticed before, not even when she'd come back to collect his shaving things after that first panic of getting him to the hospital.

Belthar sat heavily in a chair as she busied herself opening windows and letting the light back in. He felt like a stranger: disoriented and lost. At last he said, "Why are you doing all this?"

"Because you're worth it," she said.

He looked confused. "Worth it?"

"You're my friend. Isn't that enough?"

"Your friend?"

"What's this, you're going to repeat everything I say all afternoon?"

"I don't understand."

"Belthar, you're my friend. I'm doing this because this is what friends do for one another. You'd do the same for me." He stared at her. "You would, you know."

"I ruined your day," he said.

"No you didn't. You're sick, you've just had a heart attack. You said you wanted me to leave, that was all. You needed to rest."

"When?"

"The other day in the hospital when you asked me to leave."

"That's not what I'm talking about."

"It's not?"

"I'm talking about on the day..."

"You mean when it happened?"

"Yes. Your naming ceremony."

She laughed. "You think you ruined my naming ceremony? Belthar, you made my naming ceremony."

"But..."

"What you did was fantastic, Belthar, naming the baby like that, I couldn't have planned it better if I tried. Everyone's still talking about it.

"Your heart attack happened afterwards and of course everyone was very concerned about you as soon as they heard - but life goes on Belthar, and we knew you weren't going to die," and she smiled as she took his hand and said, "but if you had it definitely would have ruined my day."

Although he didn't move to acknowledge her touch, he said, "I wish I had."

"What, died?"

He nodded.

"How can you say that? It wasn't your time." She was shocked but as she looked at him she realised that he was speaking a flat truth, that he was speaking without emotion and simply stating a fact.

"I didn't realise it was that bad," she said.

Outside, the forest whistled and trilled and a truck growled on the highway far on the other side of town. A dog barked in a neighbour's yard. The thump-thump of a hi-fi across the valley. And in the room the silence heavy between them, the old man and the young woman.

"Belthar, is there nothing I can do?"

He shook his head. "You've done so much already."

She patted his hand and leaned back in her chair. "You too, Belthar. You too."

15. Hibiscus rosa-sinensis

Storm had begun her vehemently military strategy for Belthar's recuperation even before she'd brought him home, and now that he was here she installed Jill in Belthar's mother's bedroom, which was larger than his own, installed the borrowed television set on his dressing table and installed bowl after bowl of brightly coloured flowers in his lounge. And although it was often Jill who did the work of cooking and washing up, it was Storm who checked that Belthar had drunk his green tea at 6:30 every morning (she believed in it), that he'd bathed at 7:00, that he'd taken his bowl of oatmeal at 7:30 (it was good for his cholesterol), that he'd had his lunch at 1:00 and that he had dined again at 6:00.

Jill tried to force some reception out of the TV using a wire coat hangar and some antenna cable she'd found at home, but she couldn't free the old box of its wheezing and snowing and it was soon abandoned. Belthar was relieved. He had no interest in what other people had to say and he hadn't wanted to hear their noise. Even the steady thrum of the radio irritated him.

Storm insisted that the curtains in his room should be opened to let the sunshine in, but he wanted them drawn to keep it out. She insisted that he dress warmly, in bed or out, but he wanted to wear pyjamas and nothing else; they were the only things which didn't feel heavy and uncomfortable on his thin and folded body.

Belthar was able to do little more than rest and eat, but even resting and eating were difficult. His sleep was miserable and he was interrupted by strange dreams and his food tasted colourless and unsatisfying. He tried to read, but the words made no sense. He agreed to a game of Scrabble with Jill, but he couldn't concentrate long enough to find any patterns in the silly wooden letters on their silly wooden stand, and he rose abruptly from the kitchen table and returned angrily to his bed, refusing to talk until she brought his dinner, when he forced a short "Thank you" purely out of habit. His mother had trained him well.

And instead of lightening, his depression deepened as the days lengthened towards mid-summer until, unable to bear his pain any longer, Storm tried to force him to confront it.

"There's no point," he said.

"Belthar, you aren't helping yourself here. How do you expect to get better?"

"There's no point. What's the point of all this, Storm? What's the point?"

"The point of getting better? Do you want to spend the rest of your life like this?

"I don't want a rest of my life," he said. "Can't you just leave me to die? What good am I? Why are you bothering me like this?"

Because she had grown fond of him. Because she had come to love him despite his temper and his sulking and his rude, sharp tongue. And because he had something else. He was gentle; under it all, he was gentle. And she needed that.

But often she forgot this and later in the afternoon she began to cry as her sister walked her to the gate, her shift over for the day. "Why are we doing this?" she said.

"Because you love him," said Jill.

"And you?"

"Because you asked me to."

"But doesn't he drive you nuts?"

"Yes, he does. But he's sick, Storm. He's depressed. We need to get him some help. I don't think we can do this on our own any more."

"But we can't afford a nurse."

"That's not what I'm talking about. We need to get him to see a doctor. Get him onto some medication..."

"You mean a shrink?"

"He needs help."

"He'd never go to a shrink."

"Wouldn't he? Or wouldn't you?"

16. Cynodon dactylon

Belthar felt strong enough to work in his garden again in the spring.

His recovery had been slow and difficult. For Storm, who had at first been attracted to him by his independence and his self-sufficiency, the dumb compliance which came with the sadness was the greatest mystery. But Jill had realised - and convinced her sister - that it was also their strongest ally, and they used it to get him to visit a psychiatrist and to take the medicines the man prescribed. The strategy and the medicines had worked, and as the nights of winter became shorter, the shadows began to lift and as his feelings and emotions returned, Belthar found an uncomfortable peace with himself and allowed himself to go back to his uncomfortable retirement.

He began slowly. The first day was easy, the second was hell. He'd lost the strength he'd won when he'd felled and chopped his tree, and instead of three hours, which it should have done - or would have before he'd got sick - cutting his lawn took three days.

He wasn't frustrated by his progress, though, slow as it was. He accepted it and found himself content just to work at the pace his body allowed. And as before, he slipped into a routine of work and rest, of tea at eleven and lunch at one, of tidying his tools away at four and of taking his bath at four fifteen.

Although he worked methodically, as he had always done, he noticed a change in himself: he wasn't quite as careful as he once would have been. Where previously he'd agonised over trimming the edges of his lawn to an absolute precision, staying strictly within the lines by marking them with pegs and string, he now allowed himself to cut them as straight as he could (which wasn't very straight at all) using his judgment alone - and not caring, or not caring too much, that the results weren't absolutely perfect.

And he found himself thinking that it was enough that the edges were cut.

And where he had previously raked the lawn after he'd finished mowing it (even although the mower had a grass catcher of its own), he now found himself trusting the machine to do its job - and wondering why he'd always made life so hard for himself.

Now the few cuttings which he left behind didn't matter.

Truth was, though, that Belthar's lawn wasn't anything like it had been last summer. Storm had hired a garden service to keep it neat while he'd been sick, a garden service with a lick-spit way of doing things, here one week, gone the next, back in three week's time, and that, and the long, cold and wet winter, had left the lawn patchy and bare. But where this would once have upset him, it was now nothing more than an irritation because he knew, and it was now enough to know, that he'd soon have it looking fine again.

Not perfect, but fine. And that, too, was enough.

Storm arrived at his gate at the end of the third day, just as he was finishing the last pass across the length of the lawn. The mower bumped over a little donga left over from the scar of his falling tree, and she watched him struggle to keep the machine moving in a straight line.

He cut the motor and a sudden silence descended on the garden. Even the turtle doves stopped their cooing and for a few moments all he could hear was his heartbeat and the rush of air as he caught his breath.

She smiled, excited. "Belthar, you're working in your garden. We'll have to cancel the garden service. It's great to see you up."

'Still the most irritating person I know,' thought the old man as he straightened himself. "I've cancelled them," he said.

"But you're working. That's great."

"So you said."

The baby was seated in a pack on her back and she shifted to make herself more comfortable. "Sheez, he's getting heavy."

"Go inside and make us something to drink," said Belthar, who'd become as used to her easy way with her child as she had to his house. "You can lie him down on the lounge."

She brought him his tea as he finished cleaning the mower and then went back in to collect the child. "I love the smell of cut grass," she said. And then: "I didn't think I'd ever see you working in your garden again, Belthar," and she started to cry.

He was uncomfortable with her tears and he was unprepared and shocked when she came forward to hug him, an awkward hug with the baby on her arm between them. His hands hovered over her back, almost patting her as she clung to him, sobbing, but he was stiff and he knew of no way of helping her. He hadn't hugged anyone in that many years and at last he took her by her shoulders and pushed her away, firm but not unkind.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, shaking her head. "Sorry," and went inside to wash her face.

When she came out again she had with her a soft blanket which she spread on the lawn. "Come and sit with us," she said, finding the shade which fell from the forest and into the garden.

Belthar sat precariously, leaning on one arm, his legs folded uncomfortably by his side. He waited for her to talk, watching to see if she'd composed herself.

"I was so scared," she said, again.

"Scared?"

"I don't want to loose you," she said and giggled nervously. "Not yet, anyway."

He didn't know what to say.

"You've become so much a part of our lives, Belthar. It just wouldn't be the same without you. Jill and Peanut, they feel it too, as if you should have been here all along. And River, he loves you too."

Belthar laughed. "How can you now that? He isn't even old enough to talk."

"He loves you," she said. "Can't you tell?" River was lying on his back, staring and smiling gently at Belthar, his chubby fingers loosely knotted together. "Can't you tell?"

Belthar couldn't tell, no. He'd never been loved by a baby before.

He looked at the child as if for the first time, looked long and hard until his staring made the child squirm and clap his hands together clumsily. "Touch him, Belthar," said Storm. "Hold him. You haven't held him since the day he was born. He wants to be held."

She picked him up and put him in Belthar's arms. "Don't worry, he's a lot stronger now than he was then," she said. "You just hold him for a while."

"And then?"

"And then nothing. Just hold him. Babies need to be held."

"I was never held."

"No, I don't suppose you were," she said. "You aren't very easy to love."

"What?"

"You aren't very easy to love, Belthar. Weren't you loved when you were little? I don't know anything about your childhood or even about where you went to school or anything. You haven't told me much, you know."

"Nothing to tell."

"Oh, there must be something."

"Nothing." He was getting angry, now.

"C'mon, Belthar. I just want to know."

"There's nothing to tell, OK? I'm not going to tell you about my childhood. There's nothing to tell. I went to school and then I went to work, like all the boys in my class, that's all.

"Here," he said, passing the child roughly back to her.

"OK, OK, I'm sorry. You don't need to get all worked up about it. Sheez."

Belthar tried to stand but he hadn't the strength. She stood and reached out her hand to help him, but he waved her away. "I can do it."

She put River down on the blanket with all a mother's tenderness and, making sure he was comfortable, turned to Belthar, who was trying to push himself up onto one knee, and said, "No. You can't do it, you stubborn, unthinking prick. You need help. You've been sick and you're probably stiff from working. You aren't as fit as you used be."

His face drained as he sat back down on the ground. "Get out of my house. Get out. I've had enough of you. Why are you trying to run my life? I've had enough. Get out."

And she picked up her baby and went inside to collect his bag and then walked out through the gate without looking at Belthar and without saying another thing.

17. Citrus aurantium

On the fourth morning after his return to his garden, Belthar walked to town, dragging his wheeled basket by its crook-shaped handle. He made slow progress. He needed to stop and rest often, and each time he stopped he wished he'd brought his hunting stick with its practical, fold out seat. It was a warm day and he began to sweat in his sports coat and tie, but he pushed on without taking them off, wearing them as a badge of dignity and remembering his mother, who had told him, when she'd patched a hole in his pants or darned the edges of his collar, that, "It's no crime to be poor, Belthar. It's only a crime to look it."

He nodded to the gardeners at their rakes and waved grimly to the matrons in their family wagons, driving back into the suburbs after their morning coffees, their gym and their never ending visits to the town's twin shopping malls.

He enjoyed the cool under the bluegum trees as he passed the golf course and stopped to rest a little on the bench outside the vet's, closed now while the doctor did his rounds.

He looked carefully to the left and to the right and to the left again, as his mother had always have him do, waiting for the cars to pass and, angry and confused, shaking his head at their speed before he crossed the busy road which separated the golf course from the water. It was a concrete road and the high whirring of the tyres across the ridges in the surface irritated him and he walked as fast as he could until, a little further along, he turned left onto a wide, brick-paved footpath alongside the Lagoon. And here, away from the noise of the traffic, he moved more slowly, sitting a while on each fussily bureaucratic wood-and-concrete bench to watch the boats riding at their moorings and the birds as they fed and rested in the shallows.

At the drivers' testing field - he never could work out why it had been built on that beautiful parkland right there at edge of the Lagoon - he sat again and watched as a young girl nervously failed her exam and bravely hid her tears from the handsome young traffic officer who'd seen them all before.

He left the pathway at the boatyard and turned inland and walked past the elegant building which had been the steamer company's offices when he was a boy and which now housed an expensive and trendy food store and smelled, instead of moth-balled travelling trunks and dusty manifests, of Indian spices and Japanese vegetables.

He stopped again at the primary school fields where a class of first graders was learning to throw and catch a ball, all stick-thin limbs and over-sized, grow-into-it clothing, and, tired almost beyond bearing, he pushed on until he came to a restaurant with tables out onto the sidewalk and there he sat and, when he'd caught his breath, ordered a cup of tea.

It was quiet this morning and the waiters stood bored at the counter, and one of them, a beautiful, dark, tall young man, elegantly arrogant, twirled his tray on the tip of his index finger, again and again, and where this might have irritated Belthar in the past, now he found it amusing and he felt indulgent toward the boy, and smiled at him when he came to take his cup.

Refreshed, he paid (and tipped) and left to cross the road into the newly elegant shopping mall which had been nothing more than a muddy and smoky timber yard when he was a boy; the same yard where his father had worked his apprenticeship when he had been a child ("A hard life, Belthar," his mother had said, although she'd never entered the yards herself. "A hard life. Not molly-coddled and spoiled and weak like you lot today. Oh no, not like that at all").

The midday siren mooed mournfully, five minutes early by Belthar's watch. At school and at work he'd listened for this sound every day, listened as it brought the lunch hour with absolute precision, and he remembered that it had only twice called out of time in the days when it had had a real job to do: once at eleven in the morning to mark the end of The War and once at four thirty in the afternoon when it made its concluding call, its final salute on the day the yards had closed forever. And now here it was again, restored and resurrected to add atmosphere to the barren passageways and empty courtyards of a shopping mall. But it was unpunctual and a little sad, an actor reduced, a sideshow ignored.

A bell clanged tunelessly, again and again, slowly and exactly, a moving sculpture tacked onto one of the factory's old steam engines, the engine painted green and red and brassed up and gentrified for the children and the tourists. A sign said this was "A Machine For Greeting A Thousand Shoppers" and Belthar shook his head and wondered if it was art.

In the main piazza, where Belthar had once breathed freshly cut pine, people sat drinking coffee at tables under umbrellas and water ran through the silver pipes and over the copper bowls of a fountain, driving a wheel and lifting and lowering a thick steel hook. "The Water Machine for Taking Time Out," said the sign, and Belthar wondered if that was art, too.

And he walked a little faster, up a ramp and out of the centre and onto the Main Street where hawkers sold hats and embroidered toilet roll holders and cell phone covers under temporary tents which had never had any history at all.

He noticed at the library that the staff greeted him as an old friend, and perhaps they'd always greeted him this way, although he'd never paid any attention to them before, these librarians and their fussy school ma'am ways. The massive old room, though, was just as it had always been: the racks of books, the brown, corduroy-covered easy chairs where the old men read their daily papers free of charge, the desks filled with young people rustling backwards and forwards through their references. The air still lightly touched by the same thick, dusty, papery smell; and, although the sun tried to stream in through the windows, to bounce into the room riotous as a child - it still entered with enthusiasm dulled, tamed and subdued, filtered to protect the books by a grey film on the glass of the dormers.

There was as little room for high-spirited suns in this holy shrine of intelligence as there was for noisy, boisterous children.

He walked through the shelves of stern non-fiction and past the hard-covered novels to the back of the room where the paperbacks stood on their dark wooden shelves and, just as he'd always done, scanned the titles in alphabetical order. Many of them were new to him and as he pulled one out he found himself dreaming of the quiet, comfortable hours he'd enjoy when he got home and began to read. 'Funny, that,' he thought, 'I've never thought about that kind of thing before,' and he shook his head, wondering, if everything was just as it had always been, why it all seemed completely changed.

He became aware that somebody was standing next to him. It was Storm.

"Hello Belthar," she said. "It's you, here in the library again. How are you? Is this what you're reading? What's it about?"

So nothing had changed after all: still the same, irritating woman. "I don't know," he said: still the same, defensive man.

They stood, awkward as lovers after a quarrel.

"I'm sorry, Belthar. I didn't mean to take over your life. It's just ... I've always been able to help, you know?"

"No," he said. "I don't."

"Look," she said, "we're friends. That's what friends do, they help each other. Especially you, Belthar, you help us in so many ways, help us the way family helps family, just by being you. You say you haven't got a family but we are your family, you know? Me, Jill, the kids, we are your family, Belthar."

"Funny kind of family."

"I know, but that's what we are."

"Why, Storm?"

"Dunno. Because we're friends? Why do you always have to question our friendship, Belthar? Isn't it enough that it just is?"

"It just is?"

"That's right. It just is."

He stared at the books. In books, people always had answers to their questions; in books people always knew what to do.

"Do you always choose from this shelf?" she asked, pointing at the novels.

"I like these books."

"Don't you ever read any non-fiction? History? Biographies? Anything like that?"

"No." He was defensive again.

"Have you tried the gardening section? You'll like the gardening books. I always come here for the gardening books."

"But I like these books."

"I know, but can't I just show you my favourite gardening book? Please?"

He followed her to another aisle and waited as she looked for the title she wanted, slowly and deliberately, her fingers stroking the spines. “I hope no one’s taken it out. I really want to show you... Oh. Here it is,” and she pulled a large blue book from the shelf.

“Come,” she said, leading him to the study tables.

She laid the book down carefully and opened it with reverence. “*The Paradise Garden*,” she said, reading the title aloud. “Did you know that paradise means garden in Persian? This book tells you all about that sort of...”

But Belthar was lost to her, slowly turning the pages and aware only of what he was seeing. She watched him for a long time until at last he looked up and said, “Are these gardens?”

“Course they’re gardens, Belthar. What else could they be?”

“But they’re so neat.”

“Neat?”

“Gardens are always so messy. These are neat. Orderly. The way they should be.”

“Should be?”

“I’ve never seen gardens like this.”

He stopped to stare at a full colour picture of a garden in which the flower beds were contained within low, mosaic-covered walls. Star-shaped and cross-shaped and arranged symmetrically around three empty pools which must once have splashed with the sound of water, they stood separated from each other by narrow paths paved with a chequerboard of ceramic tiles in black and white.

“The garden in the palace of the Pasha Abd al Kari in the medina in Fez,” he read. “Built *circa* 1860.”

“That’s a courtyard garden,” she said.

“I know, but it’s what I want for my garden.”

“You serious?”

“Of course.”

“Do you know what it would cost to build all those walls and paths? If you want a formal garden, why don’t you look at the French style?”

“Didn’t know they had different styles.”

“Wait here,” she said. “I want to show you,” and she pushed her chair back and stood and disappeared into the aisles again and returned with another over-sized volume and placed it before him with a flourish and triumph. “There,” she said. “Look for Versailles.”

“For what?”

“You can’t be that ignorant.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Versailles. The Palace.” Impatiently, she searched for the name in the index and flicked the pages until she found it. “There,” she said. “Look.”

And again Belthar was caught by the neat orderliness of the garden. He stared at the trimmed hedges of a box parterre green against the sandy, gravelled paths and at the exquisite harmony of a line of round-head orange trees rhythmically repeated one after the other like pawns on a chessboard.

“I’ll take it,” he said, rising and turning to the main desk where a chewing-gum-bored librarian checked cards and stamped loan sheets with a due date two weeks from today.

18. Rosmarinus officionalis

On the fifth morning of his return to his garden, Belthar began to read. When he'd got home the previous afternoon, he'd stared at the photographs in the book for hours, absorbed and intrigued, lost to himself and unaware of the time; but on the fifth morning, with his breakfast things washed and dried and packed away, each in its own allotted place, he ignored the photographs and he began to read.

He'd never brought such a large book into his home. *European Garden Design* had four hundred and ninety six pages (he'd checked) and on each of them he found at least one - but usually two, and sometimes even three - beautiful pictures in colour and black and white. He'd gone through them one by one, methodically from first to last, ignoring his supper and drunk with beauty.

He had to understand. He had to know more.

He read as he had worked. He stopped to rest his eyes after every forty five minutes and at eleven, one and three he stopped to eat or drink. At four thirty precisely, and making sure that it lay square to the edge of the table where it would rest for the night, he marked his place with the old, unused Christmas card that had always been his bookmark and closed the book.

He read again on the sixth day and by the seventh, when Storm and River came to visit, he'd decided that he would build a garden just as ordered and as neat as the masterpieces that surrounded those European palaces. And like them he, too, would make his mark with plants and pathways, sculptures and stones.

"I'm enjoying this book. Surprised myself how much I've enjoyed it... I want to build one of these gardens here, Storm," he said and - surprising himself even more - "Will you help me?"

"Course I'll help you," she said, surprised herself and pleased. "We'll begin with a plan. Have you got any paper here? Scrap paper? And a pen? And a measuring tape?"

From his writing desk he brought an old note pad, its pages faded at the edges, and in the kitchen he found a pencil. From his tool store in the laundry he brought his tape measure, its brown leather casing oiled and cared for but cracked with age even so. "It was my father's," he explained. "Haven't used it much over the years."

They went outside and began to measure, Belthar holding the tape's end wherever he was told, Storm walking quickly from point to point as her child, entertained by their movement, crawled and giggled on the lawn nearby.

By triangulating its corners to the corners of his fence, she quickly and expertly plotted the position of the house on the stand.

"I don't know if the fence line is correct," he said. "Never had it surveyed when I inherited the house."

"Don't worry about that, we'll work with what we've got," she said, bowing her head over the notepad to make another mark. "Now we need to measure the pathway."

Straight and utilitarian, Belthar's pathway was a simple tarred spine running directly from the little porch in front of his front door and down to his gate. It was edged by a line of crumbling red bricks stood on their side, and here and there it had become threadbare and worn.

At last they had all the measurements they needed and, with the baby crying for his feed, went inside to tea.

"Will you think about taking up the path?" she asked as she opened a bottle of that awful mushed fruit baby food and began to feed the child.

"I don't know. Must I?"

"It depends. What type of garden are you thinking of building? Renaissance? A knot garden?"

"Very simple and neat," he said. "Has to be neat. What do you suggest?"

The baby had had enough and she lifted him upright and held him over her shoulder and patted his back and then she pulled the notepad forward and began to draw. "Here's what we've got," she said. "Not to scale, of course, but we'll worry about getting everything accurate later." The notepad slid on the polished table and he put out his hand to hold it still for her.

"Your property is roughly rectangular and your house is set well back, so I think you should concentrate your design in the front garden." She drew with confidence, her strokes quick and bold: the main building with its patio, the path and the fence, double lines to show the two windows on

the front façade, equally balanced side to side, a closed quarter circle to indicate his door. “Now. What style are we going for?”

He brought out the book and leafed through until he found the chapter he’d read - again and again - on the gardens at Versailles. “Like that,” he said. “French Baroque. Just like that.”

She looked briefly at the pictures before returning to her drawing. She sketched four large, rectangular beds, two on either side of the path and, exactly half way down the path, a fifth, circular shape that cut into the inside corners of each of the rectangles. “A classic cross-shaped parterre with a focal point in the middle,” she said. “Now all we need to do is decide what you’re going to plant. What d’you think?” and she held the pad up for his inspection.

“That’s all?” He’d expected something altogether more intricate and he couldn’t hide the rudeness in his voice.

“Well, yes. But it’s just an outline. A sketch, something to begin with. Don’t you like it?”

“No, no, it’s fine. Maybe I just don’t understand.”

“Don’t worry, Belthar. It’s OK, I’m not offended.”

“Sorry,” he said.

“Here, let me explain. Each of these squares is a flower bed. There’ll be a narrow strip of lawn round the outside and these here are the paths. I think you should fill them with gravel, although you might like to make them out of brick if you want them to be more permanent. Gravel takes quite a bit of maintenance, but it’s what they have at Versailles.

“Each bed will have a low hedge around the edges and we’ll plant them in a curlicue pattern and inside we’ll plant different annuals to give you colour at different times of the year. In the middle of each one we’ll put a single topiary, I think a simple lollipop would be best...

“What do you think, should we use rosemary for the hedges?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “What do you say?”

“Not sure myself, but I’ll think about it.”

She checked on the baby who was sleeping now in her arm and then she looked up at him and said, “Are you ready for this, Belthar? Do you know how much work you’re making for yourself?”

“What are you talking about? I haven’t got anything else to do.”

“Just so’s you know,” she said. “I don’t want you to be disappointed by the results.”

“Make my own results.”

19. Olea europea subsp. Africana

When Storm returned on the next afternoon with River riding in his pack on her back, his pale yellow sun bonnet held down by an elastic strap under his chin, she found Belthar, dangerously inexperienced Belthar, swinging a pick at the tar of his pathway. He told her he'd been to the hardware store this morning to buy it and she smiled to herself and almost laughed out loud at the thought of him walking home in his jacket and tie with a workman's pick over his shoulder. "You're incredibly strong for an old man who's just had a heart attack," she said.

"Exercise is good for me."

"How're you doing, Belthar? Really? You as good as you look?" She pointed at the pick. "You need some practice with that thing."

"I'm fine. Just fine," he said and in his turn pointed at the large envelope in her hand. "That my plan?"

"It is, and this here's all the stuff you're going to need," she said, handing him a plastic shopping bag. "String and pegs, except I bought six inch nails for pegs."

"I've got nails," he said.

"I know, I thought you might, but I got some more. We're going to need them. But I only bought about twenty so it's no problem."

"How much did all this cost? I'll pay you for it," he said.

"Don't be silly. It's a gift: a now-that-you're-better-gift and that's much better than a get-well-gift, don't you think?"

He knew there was no point in arguing so he took the bag and lead the way into the house.

She took off her pack at the door and hefted the baby onto her hip and when they were seated at the table, pulled the plan from its envelope and opened it out. Belthar was always surprised at how much she could do with only one hand, especially at times like these when River was lively and wriggling and pulling her hair.

She'd drawn everything accurately and to scale and the page was filled with dimensions and comments about how the parts should be built. Her writing was neat and clear and the plan was pleasant and easy to read. To Belthar it was beautiful. It was art.

"What am I going to plant?"

"This is just a dimensions drawing to show you how to lay it all out. I'll draw the planting plan separately. But I was thinking we should use olive trees as centrepieces in the middle of the beds. They're quite slow, you know, and they'll be easy to keep trim."

He studied the drawing again and then he said, "Thank you. Now I see what you meant."

"You like it?" she asked, happy and proud, a child receiving the approval of a father.

"It's exactly what I want. I'll begin building it as soon as I've got rid of my pathway."

"Well, we can lay it out now, if you like. It'll be much easier if we do it together and the strings won't interfere with your work on the path."

"Yes, that would be fine."

Belthar went into the laundry to collect his tape measure and Storm strapped River into his backpack and they went outside and she began the work by finding the mid-point of the house. "It's easy to make a right angle, Belthar. Remember your geometry: the square on the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares on the other two sides? It's the three-four-five ratio..."

He stared blankly at her and she laughed. "Never mind, just do as I say and you'll understand."

They found the points she needed by making triangles and squares with the string, marking and lifting, leaving behind the permanent marks and lifting the construction lines, marking and lifting, marking and lifting until by the end of the afternoon they'd set down the outline for his new flower beds and his new pathways.

And then they stood back to look at their work.

"It's going to be perfect," said Belthar. "Everything in its place and a place for everything. I'll order the gravel first thing in the morning."

-x-

That night he thought about his mother. A tiny woman who wore her hair in a bun in his earliest memories and later, after his father had died, in a no-nonsense men's cut which she groomed with a plastic comb and parted to one side. She always wore dresses or skirts and blouses, never slacks, and she bought lime green maid's housecoats which she used when she was cooking or cleaning and which, at other times, she stored on a wooden hanger behind her kitchen door. But these were his impressions of her in the days before she became ill, because when he was a child and a teenager and even a young man, he was sure that she spent the largest part of her time doing just that: cleaning and cooking.

It seemed to him, too, that in those days (when she was at home and not out visiting - which was rare - or attending church - which was regular) she'd always been inside the house, the exceptions being, of course, when she hung out her laundry on Thursdays or when she washed the windows on Mondays with her 4-step ladder, her plastic gloves, her bottle of spirits and a pile of last Sunday's newspapers (she always bought and read The Sunday Times - but Belthar bought anything he could find because cleaning the windows in the way she'd taught him was all he ever did with them. What was in them, reading them, wasn't of any interest at all).

And because she was always inside, he couldn't remember her ever having worked in the garden (and although he tried, he couldn't remember if he'd ever seen his father doing so, either). The garden had always been Belthar's job, even in the days before he was a teenager, mowing the lawn and picking up the cuttings and sweeping up the leaves from the tree. And fixing the fence.

He'd been fixing that fence almost all his life.

He wondered if the garden grew like it did because his mother had designed it that way. Before he'd started changing it, it had had all her marks: it was neat and simple, useable (although he never remembered her using it) and practical. The path which lead to the door. The swing for seating, the tree for shade. The fence to mark the edges.

He could imagine that it was she who had told the builder where to put the path and the gate, that it was she who had chosen the swing bench and that it was she who had decided on the position of the tree. His father, his vague and distant father, he thought, wouldn't have noticed these things, one way or the other.

Still, he decided, his mother probably disapproved of the garden. If she'd married someone else, the sawmill manager, say, or one of its directors, she'd have had a terraced colonial park like the parks that surrounded the houses of the Upper Town, with pools and fountains and an orchard and a gang of gardeners to lean on her rakes and take her instructions.

But she'd been the daughter of a railway worker, a dreamer who dreamed of being a lady (but who'd married Belthar's father, a bureaucrat who'd fallen off an inspection platform at a mill, caught his leg in the machinery and died) And all she'd got out of life was a house and an inadequate pension and a small and silent child.

Belthar had often thought she'd blamed him and not his father for the size of that legacy because, he expected, she could have lived a much more genteel life if she hadn't had to spend the little she had on his clothing, on his schooling and on the frivolous things that he, a boy, had needed - although it was she who decided what those things should be: soccer boots (but he never played games); a fishing rod (which he did enjoy); a portable transistor radio (because they were the rage); and the Boy's Own Annual (which was his standard Christmas gift. Every year. Every single year, the Boy's Own Annual).

But she was - or had wanted to be - a gentlewoman and she was correct and kind in her own way; although his boundaries were limited, her punishments, when she tendered them, were light. And besides, in their little seaside town, where nothing much happened and Belthar spent most of his time out on the Lagoon, how much trouble could he really have caused?

'No,' he thought, 'in the end she caused all the trouble.' And he surprised himself with that.

But thinking about it, he realised that it was true and that the trouble in the end was that her illness had never really been defined: she'd taken to her bed and he'd had to look after her and that was all there was to it. He'd brought her books and magazines and papers to read every evening when he came home from work; he'd cooked their meals; he'd changed her bed linen and managed their laundry (and it was because of her illness that he'd bought their first washing machine); he'd given her water for her bedside table every night and brought her tea when he woke every morning (and then, if she'd woken before him, she'd look at him accusingly and he'd hate that he'd kept her waiting). And later, when she really had wasted to the point where she could no longer stand, he'd

taken leave at work and turned her over every half an hour and rubbed alcohol on her bed sores and brought her her bed pan and wiped her clean and flushed away her shit.

And that's why he'd sold her car as soon as she'd died.

-x-

It took him much longer to dig up his pathway than he expected, but he worked solidly and methodically, breaking the blacktop into moveable chunks and then loading them onto his barrow and wheeling them out onto the side of the road. He called a transport company and arranged a date when they'd come and remove the rubble; but twice he had to phone to postpone and then when he was ready they were busy but at last they arrived in a battered old truck and a tumble of labourers and diesel fumes and took away the final pieces of his mother's garden.

The lawn had grown long and untidy in the warmth of the summer, and Belthar had ignored it while he'd worked on the tar.

"I want to poison it," he told the man in the hardware store. "I'm going to plant a parterre and I don't want it to grow back again."

The man stared without expression from behind his thick plastic-rimmed glasses. "Part what?" he said.

"A parterre," said Belthar. "A formal garden. And I don't want the grass to grow back again."

"Oh. Well then you'll need a total herbicide. This stuff's good," and he pointed to a red and yellow tin, pointed at it without touching it as if it wasn't safe. "The best there is. Trouble is it's been banned."

"Then how come you've still got it on the shelf?"

The man waved his hand and pursed his lips. A shrug and a smile of conspiracy: "You're one of us," he might have said. "You'd understand."

"How do you use it?" asked Belthar.

"It's a spray. Easiest would be to use a mix nozzle on the end of a hose."

"Haven't got one of those," said Belthar. "They expensive?"

"No, not at all," said the man as he brought one out to show it off and explain how it was used. "Just mix the poison in a bucket top ten times the normal dose, pop the nozzle on the end of the hose and the mixer in the bucket, turn on the water and spray. The pressure of the water pulls the poison through and dilutes it to the proper strength: no pumping, no problems. Couldn't be easier.

"Course you'll want two mix nozzles and two buckets: one for herbicides and one for poisons, just to be safe."

"One'll be enough," said Belthar. "Don't use any poisons and I've got a spare bucket at home."

With his purchases in his basket - and with the illegal tin packed at the bottom and well out of sight - Belthar made his way to the library to renew his book and to the nursery to visit Storm and Jill. There he was greeted warmly as always but he felt guilty from carrying contraband and he left quickly and made his way home along the brick path and across the concrete road by the Lagoon.

He sprayed on a dry and windy morning, one of those irritatingly hot days which always come just before a storm. The instructions required a mix of 200:1 - but he decided that it would work quicker if he mixed at 100:1. The instructions said to spray lightly - but he decided to drench the lawn, and by the time the evening came his once immaculate sward was wilting and the leaves had begun to brown at the edges.

The storm passed during the night and by the time Belthar woke the next morning it had left behind a soft and gentle rain. The clouds lifted at midday and after finishing his lunch and washing up, Belthar was able to return to his work. He pulled on his Wellingtons and his gloves and took out his garden fork and began to remove the grass from the soft earth. It was pleasurable work and, knowing how hard the clay of his garden could become, he was grateful for the rain. He fell into a rhythm of standing to turn the soil and squatting to remove the runners by hand, careful not to kneel onto the bare earth because that would muddy his pants. He worked in rows and at the end of each row he collected the dead grass in his wheelbarrow and took it out it to the street, dumping it where he'd dumped his tar.

"Buggers," he said aloud. "Typical. They didn't even clean up properly."

He would have liked to have raked the soil into a neat and flat perfection, but it was too wet and didn't break easily and, for the meantime anyway, he gave up trying.

He'd removed about a quarter of his lawn and he was washing his tools under his tap when Storm leaned over his gate and looked at what he had done. Horror crossed her face as she saw the damage - even the trees were going brown - and she cried, "Belthar! What happened to your lawn? Did you spray it? And what happened to the trees?"

Everything in threes, thought the old man, bitterly and quickly defensive.

"What did you use, Belthar? You better show me the can. Why didn't you ask me?"

He took her to the laundry and she stared, disgusted, at the poison. "Don't you know this stuff's illegal? Where did you get it? Who sold it to you? Is it new? Did you buy it recently? Tell me, Belthar."

Belthar was sullenly silent for a long moment. "Got it at the hardware," he said. "Bought it yesterday."

"Didn't they tell you it's been banned? How can they do this? It shouldn't even have been there. They shouldn't have it in their shop at all.

"That place. It's like Noah's Ark, it's so old." And that's what it was - old and old-fashioned. It smelled of oil and dust and it had a thick, worn, wooden counter near the door, and behind the counter a group of apronned old men who attended to you and behind them rows and rows of shelves filled with tools, nails, nuts, bolts and chains, glues, poisons and paints. And its customers never came near any of it until they were ready to pay for it.

He looked at her, suddenly angry. "Stop it," he said. "Stop it. I'm sorry I've upset you - but just stop it."

And she began to laugh. "That's probably the first time you've ever apologised to me, d'you know that?" And she laughed some more. "We're making progress!"

She lifted the canister and began to read. "It's a contact herbicide, I think," she said. "Shouldn't do any permanent damage. And it's raining, so I don't suppose the trees will be too badly affected. Was there a lot of wind when you sprayed?"

"Yes."

"Oh. That could be bad. But the rain will wash it away and we might be lucky."

"I didn't spray the trees," said Belthar. "Don't know why they're dying."

"Wind drift," she said. "You shouldn't spray when it's windy."

"They'll recover?" he asked.

"Should do, I guess."

"I'm sorry, Storm. I just wanted to kill the grass. I wanted to surprise you and show you the garden when it was finished. Didn't expect you to visit 'til the weekend."

"You were acting weird when you came to the nursery yesterday. I came to see if you were OK, that's all. What was wrong? Had you already sprayed?"

"No."

"You OK?"

"I'm fine. Can't you just drop it?"

"That's what you want?"

"It's what I want."

"OK, I'll drop it. What do you want to talk about, rather?"

He offered tea and they drank at the kitchen table. "I went and photocopied your plan to keep the original neat," he said. "I think I'll have it framed when the garden's done," and from the back pocket of his trousers he brought the copy, folded and already worn.

"It's going to be magnificent," she said.

20. Marigold F1 Hybrids

Like the job of removing the tar, the job of forming and preparing the beds and the pathways took much longer than Belthar had expected. For twelve weeks he worked, his rigid routine unvarying. He dug out the grass and lined the planting areas with rows of bricks in single file; then he laid out the pathways and created a space where a narrow strip of lawn would separate the gravel from the flower beds; he completed the repair of his fence; the builder's supply dumped a load of sand-coloured gravel on his sidewalk and he wheeled it in one barrow-load after the other and spread it out and raked it level. And he stopped only when everything was done and ready for planting, when the building of the garden was complete.

Formal and hard and unforgiving, he had stamped himself on his land.

Storm produced the planting plan and they studied it together in the evenings and on the weekends when she brought River - and sometimes Jill and Peanut - to visit, and Belthar quickly learned the names of a hundred different trees and hedges and ground covers and annuals and perennials. And as the days of his garden grew into months she noticed that his body grew with it - it was hard, now, and strong from the work, his waist narrow, his face tanned and when he swung his pick or lifted a shovel it was with practiced confidence and his movements were clear and precise, an honest labourer's dance, an enjoyment of its own. Even his time with the children became easier and she watched with happy pride when he picked her child up just because he loved him, noticed when he began to tease Peanut in the way that she teased him and noticed, too, when he began to play simple games with both of them, his awkwardness fading with each new visit.

"Belthar," she said, "you may be building a garden out there, but the real one's the one you're planting in your heart."

"'Ay?"

"We're a family. You could be the children's granddad. In fact you are their granddad."

"Nonsense," he said.

"They haven't got any others," she said.

"No grandparents?"

She sat silent. "I don't have a lot to do with my family, Belthar. Except Jill. They're too different. I mean ... I'm too different... Well, maybe that's not what I mean... Look, Belthar, this isn't easy for me to say, but I think you ought to know."

"Don't tell me, then."

"No, I think you should know. I want you to know. But promise me you'll still respect me?"

"Respect you?"

"Just promise."

"What are you talking about, Storm?"

"Our parents had - have - a lot of money, Belthar. Daddy made it in mining and..."

"You want me to respect you because your parents have a lot of money, Storm? You don't act as though you've got a lot of money."

"I don't. My parents have."

"But you talk about them as if they were dead."

"No, they're still alive, but I don't want anything to do with them."

"They cut you off?"

"No - I cut them off."

"What did you do? It must have been terrible."

"Actually, it's what he did - or rather, what I think he did. And what he said."

"I don't understand. Did you do something terrible or didn't you?"

"I fell in love, Belthar, that's all. That was my crime. I fell in love.

"My father was already quite rich when I was born. They weren't exactly poor when he was growing up, but I suppose you'd call them lower middle-class and after he finished his articles he went into business for himself and made a lot of money very quickly. Supplied the mines with ventilators or switches or something like that.

"I don't know why, but he always tried to hide his background. Did quite a good job of it, I suppose, because even in my earliest memories we were living like real colonials - waiters with white gloves and red fezzes at the dinner table, tea parties, gin-and-tonic, whisky-and-soda, that

kind of thing. Him and my mum bought their respectability wherever they could. Like their house: they found an old one rather than building a new one because he said the old ones had more cachet. It's got seven bedrooms, for Christ's sake, and most of them have never been slept in. Or not since I can remember.

"And my mother, too. She's always on about old money and she does everything to wear hers as if it came from another generation.

"Course this all seemed natural to me when we were growing up. When we were little Jill and I had a, I don't know, what would you call her? A governess? An au pair? A permanent baby sitter? Whatever, her name was Mrs Wright and I suppose she looked after us as well as she could but she was the coldest woman I ever knew, Belthar, although I don't think she ever meant us any harm. I think she told us once that her husband died in the war and she was probably just a lonely old bird who never found whatever she was looking for."

"And what about her children?"

Sky stopped. "You know I don't even know if she had any. I went to her flat once, it was tiny and filled with too much furniture, but I don't remember much about the place. No pictures or anything that I can remember, except this one old black and white photo of Jan Smuts that hung in a passage. I remember that. Jan Smuts in his army uniform with his little white goatee hanging on a dirty enamelled wall. It was a big building and it was all dark and sooty and I've got a clear picture of the fire escape and the back yard. I think that was the first time I saw anything 'poor'" (she made the parentheses in the air with two fingers of each hand) "and I didn't ever go there again.

"I don't suppose she used to spend much time there, either - not while she was working for us, at least. She used to sleep at our house almost every night because our parents were always going out.

"My father has always given a lot of money to charity, never said no as far as I can tell, and so he's always had to attend all these functions where they say thank you to him. And every time they give him a silver tray. I think my mother must have a hundred of them, all engraved with his name. That's how they do it. You'd think that the people who run those charities would know that every man who gives away large amounts of money has a hundred silver trays with his name engraved, wouldn't you? You'd think that they'd think of something original."

But Belthar couldn't answer and wasn't sure if he was expected to.

"And that's the thing, you see," she said, after a pause. "They gave money to everyone. Even to us. But with us it was always just money - although with us it wasn't very much of it.

"When we were little we were expected to come into my mother's dressing room for half an hour in the evening while he smoked a cigar and drank his whiskey and she put on her make-up and her beautiful cocktail dresses. They always asked us about school - always about school, even during the holidays it was about the last term or our plans for the next one - and then they'd say goodnight and we'd have to leave and Mrs Wright would put us to bed.

"That was about as much contact we had with them and it carried on almost until I was about thirteen."

"What happened when you were thirteen?"

"The pretence just stopped, I suppose. We stopped going in, they stopped asking for us. He was travelling a lot more by then, but mum continued going out every night. And usually at lunchtime, too. 'Soirees,' she used to call them. I don't know, maybe she went to dinner parties, maybe she went to clubs or concerts, maybe she had a lover. But it was every night. Every single night."

"Where do they live now?" asked Belthar.

"They're still in the same place. Daddy," she said, infecting the name in the way she said it, "says established families like his shouldn't move around. He'd like to see the place go to his son and to his son's son after that."

"You've got brothers?"

"No. And that's probably the problem: it's just me and Jill. I don't think my father thinks much of women, and I know he doesn't think much of daughters. He wanted sons who could carry on the business for him."

"But you could have gone into the business. That's not such a strange thing these days, women in business. Weren't you interested in it?"

"Interested in the business? We never had a chance to be. That wasn't Daddy's style."

"And what about school? Where did you go to school?"

"Diocesan. We were day scholars 'til sixth grade, then we were put in the boarding house 'til matric."

"Never went to boarding school," said Belthar. "Sometimes wished I had."

"No you don't," she said. "It was brutal. I hated it. The older girls all behaved like they owned us, and most of them still behave like they own us whenever you meet them. I'd rather have been at home than in that place. Oh sure, we had stables at school and if you had horses you were considered one of the elite and Jill and me, we had horses. But I never could ride properly, even although Daddy always bought us the best mounts and the best trainers.

"Money can't buy anything except things, Belthar, and all my parents' money ever bought us was things. Material things. But that's not what children want - they want your time and your love, and I promise you there wasn't any of either going around when we were growing up."

"And Jill?"

"Jill loves me, I know that, and I love her. I suppose we brought each other up, in that way," she said. "She's the best sister anyone could have and I love her, Belthar. But she isn't my mother.

"Or my father."

He was growing uncomfortable hearing these things, and he stood up, hoping that if he offered her a cup of tea she would stop. But she needed to talk. "They wanted me to become a lawyer or a doctor or something, but I was an average student and I would never have got into any of those courses, so after matric I enrolled for a BA in Social Work. The Rich Girl's Marriage License, that's what they used to call it, but I was serious, I wanted to help other people, Belthar, I really did.

"But that's also when I began with the drugs."

Belthar sat down as if he'd been hit. "Drugs? You?"

"Yeah, well..." and her eyes reddened and she began to cry.

He stood again and went to her and awkwardly put his face against hers and his arms around her shoulders and he held her. His back began to ache, but he continued to hold her until long after her tears had stopped.

She sniffed and pushed him gently away. "Thank you, she said. "Thank you," and he gave her a paper napkin to wipe her face.

"I was going out with a guy called Edwin," she said, at last. "He grew up on the street and in foster homes and orphanages. He wasn't like anyone I'd ever met and we loved each other from the beginning.

"Course Daddy" - she spat it again - "wasn't impressed. Far as he was concerned, a person of my status should have been dating all the rich boys, the society guys with their trust money and their sports cars. There were plenty of them around and my mother kept telling me to 'play the field.' But Edwin was different. He wasn't like any of them and he loved me, Belthar.

"He loved me.

"My parents didn't make a lot of fuss about it at first. In fact, I think they thought it was amusing in their strange way. Playing with the underdog, that's what they thought I was doing, and maybe they thought I should - after all, I was studying social work.

"They never met him, and maybe in their eyes he was just another case study. And I think they thought it was innocent. Well, in the beginning anyway.

"Varsity was a lot easier for me than school, and I passed first and second year no problem and we continued seeing each other.

"Edwin shared a flat across the road from the main gate with a couple of the other students and we used to spend every afternoon there, sometimes making love, but mostly just hanging out, you know how it is with students. And sometimes we used to go down to the Union and drink coffee and talk.

"But in third year things started to get heavy. I think my parents began to realise that I was actually in a relationship and that it was serious - but it had always been serious, Belthar, and I was growing more and more attached to him."

"Then one evening my father called a family dinner and asked when I was going to begin taking my responsibilities seriously and we argued. We didn't often have dinners together so I was stressed to begin with and I told them about Edwin and who he was and everything.

"My father had a fit. He screamed at me, he insulted Edwin, said he was a dangerous lowlife and a gold digger and that he was only after my money and if I gave him even one brass cent he'd

pass it on to his illegal commie friends. And he hadn't even met him, Belthar. And it was crazy, too, because my sister and I, we never had much money - they believed in keeping a tight rein on us and we both earned our own pocket money. We had jobs in this vegetarian restaurant where the students used to hang out and the food was cheap. It was a dumb place to be a waiter because most people ordered the cheapest things on the menu and nobody ever had any money for tips.

"Anyway, Daddy and I had a massive shouting match and I stormed out and everything went downhill from there, I guess. But it got worse, because when I got to Edwin's flat I argued with him, too. I wanted his sympathy, but he was on some other mission and I don't think we really knew what each other was on about that night.

"Anyway, we got over it, although I never really made it up with my dad.

"Then during the mid year break I discovered I was pregnant and I told my parents. I was so happy and I wanted them to see how serious I was about Edwin. But they weren't happy at all, and I suppose I can understand that now. My father told me to get rid of it and offered to send me to London where he knew someone. You couldn't have abortions legally in this country in those days, but there was no way I was going to do anything like that and besides, I loved Edwin and I wanted his baby."

Again she started to cry, but this time Belthar sat still and waited for it to pass.

"I'm sorry," she said, wiping her eyes. "I haven't behaved like this in years. It's your fault," and she laughed.

"My fault?"

"It's because you're kind to me. I haven't had anybody to really talk to who wasn't being paid to listen."

"Kind?"

"You listen, Belthar, you listen, and even if you don't realise it, that's one of the kindest things you can do for anyone."

Uncomfortable, he signalled for her to continue. "You wanted his baby."

"Fuck, yes, I wanted his baby. I wanted him more than anything, but things got really uncomfortable. My father went mad, said no daughter of his was going to live with scum like that and that he'd cut me out of his will if I didn't forget about Edwin right away.

"Then when he realised there was no ways I was going to have an abortion he offered to pay to have the baby adopted and he said he'd give Edwin ten thousand rand if he'd disappear. Said someone like him would consider it a generous settlement.

"Can you believe it, Belthar? That you could try to buy someone off like that? Reckon that my love was worth a measly ten grand? But that was my Daddy, solving every thing by paying for it.

"But that was it - it was just money, it was always just money. Daddy never put any feeling into anything he did, he never put any love into anything. He just thought about his reputation and then he put money into it."

"What did you do?"

"I moved out and went to live in a commune with some of the other students. But by then I was doing everything and, well, I lost the baby and with all the stress and everything, I lost Edwin, too."

"He died?"

"No, I mean we broke up."

"And your parents?"

"I went round to tell them about it one Sunday. Sunday was always a big day with them because that was when they entertained. Long lunches that dragged on into evening cocktail parties and I thought that if I went there when they had guests around I'd be able to get my father aside and talk, that he'd be more reasonable when he had a few drinks in him, that he wouldn't want to create too much of a scene.

"But Jesus, how wrong can you be?

"As soon as I arrived he jumped on me. In front of his guests he said, "So, our little girl's come home has she? Dropped her little social experiment has she?'

"I kept my cool, though, and said no, I hadn't left my boyfriend, I'd come here to try and talk to him and I asked if I could see him privately.

"He was a lot drunker than I'd seen him in a long time and he was pretty belligerent and we landed up having a hell of an argument right there in front of everybody and he told me to get out and never come back. Said there was now way any little slut like me would ever get anything out him again.

"I begged my mom to talk to him but she refused. She was embarrassed and she never did anything to oppose Daddy so in the end I just left."

Memories clouded her face and she looked as if she would weep once more, but instead she laughed as Belthar reached for another napkin.

"You don't even realise how sweet you are, do you?" she said.

"Wouldn't call me sweet."

"You are, Belthar. Look at you, ready to offer me comfort without even knowing you're doing it."

"Wouldn't call me sweet."

And she laughed again.

His old fridge rattled to a stop and the silence intruded on them. The sun had dipped behind the hills across the Lagoon and it was getting cold, but Storm needed to tell him this and she ignored herself as she shivered once in her thin cotton T.

"In the end I decided to run away and I came here."

"Why here?"

"It was hippie heaven in those days. Lots of drop outs. Some of the people I'd known from school were living here and the hippies I met were always the most loving people, you know?"

"And your degree?" he asked.

"I didn't finish it. I didn't have any money, but I managed to find a place to stay and I got a job at Madison's. Remember that? They closed it when the old man died."

"Never heard of it."

"But you've been here all your life, Belthar."

"Never heard of it."

"Well, it was nursery out on the Rheenendal Road and I worked there. It wasn't a very big place and it was really old fashioned and I spent most of my time pricking out marigolds into seedling trays.

"It was easy work, sitting at the potting bench, but I was out of it most of the time and it wasn't long before I was fired. But I was lucky because Jill had fallen pregnant, too, and after she'd broken up with the father she decided to come here and live with me.

"She was the one who got me to go to rehab."

"But wasn't that very expensive?"

"Yes, it was. I went to a private one."

"But how did you pay for that?"

"I didn't. Jill did and I never asked where she got the money. From mum and dad, perhaps, but I still don't know and I don't think I want to know, either."

She stared at the table top and rubbed a finger across the burnished wood, tracing an endless, invisible pattern and drawing comfort from its smoothness.

"And that's it, Belthar."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"Tell me about the rehab. I didn't know..."

"Another time, OK?"

"Oh. And River's father?"

"Joshua. I went out with him for a while while his boat was here for repairs. It wasn't anything serious, and I found out I was pregnant after he'd left for overseas. River looks just like him."

"But haven't you tried to contact him?"

"No, not really. We're better off this way."

Belthar waited a while and then said, "so what was it? Rape?"

Even in the near darkness, he could see the colour drain from her face. "You insensitive prick!" she whispered. "How can you say that? How can you say that? Rape is the most frightening, degrading..."

Flustered, Belthar stood and went to the kettle and said, “Make you some tea?”

“Tea? What is it with you? What is it? Hey? Why can’t you understand simple things like that? Tell me, Belthar, c’mon, tell me.”

The old man was shaking and he raised his hands in a helplessness and they hovered as if they were trying to find some reality which lay just beyond their grasp. “But I do understand, Storm,” he said at last. “I do understand. I do.” And they looked at each other in silence for a long, long time.

And then she dismissed him: “How can you possibly understand?”

He leaned back against the counter where the kettle stood and looked down at the ground and said, “But I do understand, Storm.”

And then he spoke for the first time in nearly fifty years, said the thing he thought he’d never say, said it simply and without emotion: “I do understand, Storm, because I was raped, too.”

23. Betula alba

On the first day of the first term of the new year, brushed and polished in a new set of clothes and wearing, for the first time, a pair of new, full-length serge pants (as a junior he'd worn shorts, summer and winter), Belthar rode his new bicycle to his new school.

Belthar's day had always begun earlier than other children's; although he was a serious and silent child and might have been seen as studious, he was in fact not a natural scholar and his mother, horrified that he might disgrace her with bad grades, insisted that he spend two hours every morning at his books. "We don't want you failing, Belthar, we don't want that," she said, and, even though the man had been dead almost since his only child could remember, "Your poor father would never understand."

And so she made him practice his arithmetic, his geometry and his algebra, 2 + 2 = 4, the square root of nine is three, $a \times b^2 = c$, over and over again in the cold of the morning, in the before dawn dark of winter and in the sparkling early sunshine of summer - every day except Sundays ("Sunday was the Lord's gift to us, Belthar, a rest day, and we'll never forget that, now, will we?").

Awkward in his uniform, Belthar was as excited as he was scared. The seven years of his junior career had been friendless and cruel, but perhaps here in this more adult environment he could begin to fit in with the society around him.

He cycled with slow precision, pausing at every stop sign, signalling stiff-armed at every turn, braking with caution as he freewheeled down the hill towards the Lagoon. He chose his route carefully to avoid any mud along the way and he emphasised each push of the pedals with a push on the handlebars as he went.

But, unlike other boys, he rode without pleasure: it was a grim task to be completed and forgotten.

A teacher greeted him at the school gate and directed him to the bicycle shed, and from there one of the prefects pointed him to the assembly room, where he found a seat in the back row and settled to watch the happy fighting as the boys reunited after their long summer break.

"You can't sit here," said a massive teenager wearing the striped blazer of the first team. "It's reserved for prefects. Go to the front row with the other slags."

"Slags?" said Belthar.

"You're a new boy, aren't you?"

Belthar nodded.

"So you're a slag. Go to the front row."

"Sorry sir, I didn't know."

The older boy laughed. "Don't worry, you'll learn." Belthar rose and picked up his bag. "What's your name?"

"Belthar, sir."

The boy laughed again. "Don't call me 'sir,'" he said. "I'm Featherstone."

"Captain Featherstone to you," said another boy. He was short and hairy, also with a striped blazer, and he looked more like a man than a boy. Belthar thought he must already have to shave every day. "Leave him, Shorty," said the captain. "He's new: he doesn't know anything yet. Just tell him what to do and he'll do it - won't you, Belthar?"

"Yes sir."

"His name is Captain Featherstone! Where's your respect?"

"Leave him, Shorty," repeated Featherstone, his voice soft with authority. "Belthar, go to the front. That's where the new boys sit."

Almost three stories in height, the cathedral-like assembly room smelled of floor polish and age, teenage testosterone and male sweat. Its wood panels were covered in gold-lettered lists, the captains of this team and the vice captains of that, the rugby and the swimming, the cricket and the tennis. The tall, narrow windows and the ornate electric chandeliers reminded Belthar of a church - but the noise was entirely profane. The rasp of thin-legged wooden chairs on wooden floors, the thunder of a thousand shuffling feet, the boom of laughter, the shouting of play.

But he was no longer excited: he was scared and intimidated and lost.

A sudden, scraping silence and the boys all stood as a tall, thin, grey and balding man, the head master, lead a procession of black-gowned teachers to their seats under the vaulting sandstone proscenium of the velvet-curtained stage.

"Let us pray," he said in a reverend voice.

Belthar would learn that every school day began with prayer; every punishment began with prayer; every sports game, every evening of debate, every school play began with prayer. But Jesus, he would later come to think, couldn't have been listening very well because he didn't always give in to the teachers' or the prefects' clearly stated demands.

They listened to the Prayer of St Francis of Assisi ("I expect to pass this way but once...") and remained standing to recite the Lord's Prayer ("Our father, who art in heaven...") and to sing a hymn ("And did those feet, in ancient times...") and to listen as the head listed his requirements for the heavenly provider: that his students should behave like gentlemen, that they should win at every game and excel at every examination; that their teachers should be guided in their work and that every single person there present should be protected from harm, evil and the demons of hunger, want and the enthusiasms of youth. The audience began to shuffle but still the old man continued and the audience began to cough; but, this being the first day of term, the Lord required many reminders before he was ready for the last ay-men.

"My name," he said, addressing himself to the fifty or sixty boys in the front of the room, "is Mister Thibault. But you will call me 'Sir.' I am your headmaster and my job is to see that you matriculate from here in five year's time with the best possible education. However, I am also the Ultimate Authority at this school, and I warn you that I will discipline any one of you who dares to step out of line." He paused and brought from behind his speaking desk a perfectly formed, whip-like cane of birch which he twisted into a delicate arch with theatrical exactness. "And as you can see, Mrs Worthington is still here to assist me in this regard."

The hall groaned: almost every one of the boys had buckled under the lady's stinging wrath.

But Mr Thibault smiled and continued: "Now, as you know, every boy in this school is required to take part in sport. You may decide which sport you prefer - but if you cannot, your masters will choose one for you.

"After school today, all the new boys will report to the sports masters: Mr Cook takes cricket and will be waiting for you in the Pavilion from 2:30. Mr Nortje takes swimming..." (Belthar would learn that at this school sport, and its prestige, was as much a religion as Christianity - more so, perhaps - and that the recitation of their results was as much a litany as the daily recitation of their prayers).

At last they came to the announcements concerning the business of learning - and Belthar wondered that there were so few of them.

"The library will be open for an hour after last period every afternoon; if you wish to stay behind after class to do your homework you are to observe absolute silence in the prep room; and finally, I am pleased to announce that, following the success of our experiment last year, Miss Calhan will continue to offer additional mathematics immediately after last period on Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays."

Mr Thibault smiled again. "Ad-maths is a non-compulsory subject which is only available to those of you who achieve the most outstanding results," he said, his voice becoming fuller and rounder as he pointed to a line of boys seated on padded chairs along the side of the room, facing in towards the audience rather than up towards the stage and wearing short, scarlet gowns over scarlet blazers.

"That gown and that blazer are the academic badges of honour at this school and you'll need to work very hard if you want to spend your final year here sitting in those rare and comfortable seats - although I can say with confidence that very few of you will make the grade."

And he smiled once more, smiled directly at Belthar, and turned and led his masters from the room as the audience scraped to its feet and stood silently while they left.

24. Parthenocissus tricuspidata

Belthar found himself in a class of about thirty and trailed behind them as Featherstone - assigned to guide them through the morning - showed them the locker room, the toilet block¸ the gymnasium and The Office.

"The Boss might have said that his door was always open," said the older boy, any trace of his earlier kindliness hidden now that he had the youngsters together in a group, "but just remember one thing. I don't care how important your parents are, or even if your daddy's the queen of England - here at school you're slags, every one of you, and you report directly to the prefects. Me and the others. And I won't have you going to The Boss and telling tales behind our backs, either, is that clear?

"Yes, Captain," they said in a low chorus of fear.

"I can't hear you!"

"Yes, Captain!"

"That's better," he said, turning and leading them into their first classroom.

They stood awkwardly at the door and looked at the bare walls which shined dully with a new coat of yellowed eggshell, at the bare floor which shined dully from its annual polishing, at the ragged rows of scholar's desks - scratched and etched by a thousand pens but shining dully now with a new coat of varnish - and at the dull, wooden master's table on its raised dais in front of its dull, wall-wide blackboard.

Even the light, which came from a bank of high and dusty, small-paned windows, seemed dull to Belthar, who had, in the interminable boredom of junior school, always taken comfort from staring at what was happening - or not happening - in the world beyond the glass.

Here, though, where the pupils should have no distractions, the windows were set too high for that. And all Belthar could see from where he stood were the top of a tree and the underside of the eaves, and between them a narrow strip of sky.

"Find a seat and wait," said Featherstone, "and I don't want to hear a word out of any of you. I'm going to call your teacher and tell him you're ready."

With the prefect gone, the boys could finally talk among themselves: theirs was a small town and most of them knew one another and soon the room began rocking with their delight.

But Belthar sat alone, unmoving and silent.

'Same people as last year,' he thought. 'Only thing that's changed is the uniform.'

A sudden shout at the door brought them to a hushed, fearful quiet. Harry Cook was a large man with a large - usually happy - booming voice.

He looked at them for a long moment, scanned them slowly, measured them one at a time.

"I am Mr Cook," he said, "your form teacher. You will call me 'Sir,' and this is the last time I am ever going to speak to you about decorum. You will not make that kind of noise in my classroom again, do I make myself clear?"

The boys mumbled but jumped when he asked again, his voice loud enough this time to carry into every corner of the red-brick building with its cladding of Boston ivy: "Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir!," they shouted in return.

"Good. Now we will become acquainted. You, boy, what's your name?"

"Belthar, sir."

"Speak up, we all want to know," and the class laughed quietly.

"Belthar, sir."

"Bell-thar! What kind of a name is Bell-thar?" and the class laughed again, a little louder this time.

The child stood silently, red-faced, his eyes fixed on an ink mark that decorated the floor.

"And what sport do you play, Belthar?"

"Don't know."

"Excuse me?"

"Don't know."

"You don't know what sport you play or you don't know what sport you play, SIR?"

"Don't know," said Belthar.

"You'll learn manners in my class, Belthar, even if it's the only thing you'll learn. Now go and stand outside and think about how you should speak to me," and Belthar walked solemnly to the door as one of the other boys struggled to hide his laughter.

"Silence!" shouted the master and Belthar thought that silence was the best he could do.

25. Salix babylonica

Because of the unfortunate coincidence of being in Harry Cook's class, Belthar found himself staying behind that afternoon to sign on for the cricket club. "It's cricket that you'll be playing," Mr Cook had said. "Leather on willow, Belthar - there's more to learn about life from that than from almost anything else you'll do at this school."

Although it was taken secretly (if, in fact, it was ever taken consciously), Belthar's vow of silence was nothing new to any of the children who'd ever had anything to do with him. They had long ago given up trying to get any kind of reaction out of him; they were used to him and they ignored him. But for Harry Cook, who worshipped the team - any team - above all else, silence was a challenge and even something to fear. No team could work as a team unless there was communication between its members.

No team could work as a team in silence.

The white-painted, green-roofed cricket pavilion was built of wood and inside it was dark and damp and it smelled of mould and whitener. Two communal cold water showers leading off two communal changing rooms for the two competing teams; a small kitchen with a wood stove on which stood three massive, old, chipped and dented enamel kettles; and a small meeting hall filled with rows of wooden benches and lined with framed team photographs and a stiff, formal portrait of the school's greatest sporting hero, a young man of promise, a captain of the First XI who had died in The War and who had given his name to the school's annual inter-house cricket championship. And at the front of the room, a small speaker's lectern and a splintering, dusty blackboard resting on a splintering, rickety tripod.

As he was now used to the conventions of the assembly hall, Belthar chose a seat in the row nearest the lectern and sat down to wait for the meeting to begin. His feet didn't quite touch the floor and he sat perfectly still, facing forward and with his fingers held together and his hands resting in his lap.

He was early. The other boys were out on the playing field, bowling to one another and catching, their blazers and ties removed in the heat of the sun, their sleeves rolled to the elbows, all of them reluctant to come inside until a hissed "chips, chips, chips, here's Cookie," sent them rushing for the door.

"What d'you think you're doing?" said Shorty, grabbing Belthar by the lapels and lifting him off his seat.

Belthar was silent.

"What are you doing, slag?"

Belthar said nothing.

"You cheeking me, slag?" shouted the older boy. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Shorty, you can't hit him," commanded Featherstone.

"I'll do what I like. Who does he think he is? Sitting on the front bench, refusing to answer me?" he said, shaking Belthar violently.

"You can't hit him, Shorty. Put him on report if he's cheeking you and we'll take care of him in the prefect's room. What's the problem, anyway?"

"He's sitting at the front," said Shorty.

"Well, tell him where he should sit, then," said the captain, a naturally reasonable boy.

Shorty reddened, and glared. "You tell him if you love him so much," he said.

The room was filling now, the boys curious to see the fight, but it was all over and Featherstone made them take their places: "the front seats are reserved for the first team," he said. "Slags stand at the back," and he moved aside and motioned for Shorty to speak.

"Now, you, new boys. Any of you know who this is?"

But the new boys were silent; very few of them had ever been into the pavilion and those who had hadn't noticed the picture.

"This, gentlemen, is the late Rory Smythe, the greatest cricketer who ever graced this school," said Shorty, pausing for the drama. "We'll be competing for The Smythe Trophy later this year - that's our inter-house competition, and it's a major battle, you hear?"

And, turning to Featherstone, he said, "Who won it last year, captain?"

"We did, of course - Joseph House."

"Indeed we did, and we've won it how many times now?"

"Two years in a row, and the time before that we lost it by a single run."

"So, slags," said Shorty, pleased with himself, pleased with their act. "The teachers have told you which houses you're in, have they not?"

Uncomfortable, the boys looked away.

"Well, have you or have you not been allocated your houses?"

A mumble as they shuffled on their feet.

"You, Belthar! What house are you in?"

But Belthar was silent.

"I said, slag, what house are you in?" And suddenly Shorty started through the benches and past the seniors in the front and into the back of the room. "I'm speaking to you, slag!"

Belthar's silence had defended him before, but now it scared him and he began to shake, his eyes to the floor, his hands at his side, their knuckles white where they gripped the hem of his blazer.

"What house are you in, slag?"

Belthar's silence had protected him before, but now it was his tormentor: although he wanted to speak he found himself unable.

Shorty raised his hand and shouted once more, "What house are you in? Answer me!"

Belthar began to cry soundlessly, the tears untouched on his cheeks, his hands locked to the cloth of his jacket. But his silence was complete, his fear too great. 'Talk,' he thought. 'Talk. Tell him. Wendell House. Wendell House. Tell him.' And he felt a sick, wet warmth trickle into his pants just as Shorty's enormous palm caught him hard on the side of his head.

The crack came loud as a shot and hung in the petrified quiet at the very moment that Harry Cook walked quickly through the open, cottage-paned doors and grinned broadly into the room.

"What's going on, here?" he boomed. "Did you just hit that slag, Shorty? And you, Bell-thar... My God, will you look at this? ... you've wet yourself! Get out! Go home ... go and clean yourself up ..." He was spitting and spluttering and his face was red and his eyes were bulging. "Get out! Get out! And you too, Shorty. I'll talk to you after practice.

"Out! Out!"

And all the other boys in the room shuffled in their discomfort and fear.

-x-

Belthar didn't clean himself up, didn't know how. He hadn't any other clothes with him and he told himself he didn't care. He walked alone under the avenue of trees towards the bicycle shed and he cycled alone away from the school towards the jetty where he'd been so happy just a day ago.

It felt like he was empty, the feeling in his stomach, and he was sad and he was drained by his loneliness. He wanted his mother and he wished that Harry Cook would hug him, that he would say he was sorry and stroke his head and stand up at his lectern and say "Boys, what Shorty did today was terrible and he will be expelled from this school immediately." And he played this scene again an again in his head as he collected his bike and rode out of the school and down to the harbour.

The little coaster was still there, a thin line of smoke lazing from her funnel and her decks busy with the work of twenty men as they loaded her with logs of expensive wood which other men had wrestled by hand from the high forests that lay to the north and east of the town. The driver of the train which bustled around the wharf tooted and waved at him, but the boy ignored him; for him it was as if the engineer knew that the scrunched-up blazer that he held in front of himself hid a telling dark stain on his pants. And in his humiliation and in his silence he mounted his bike and rode back onto the causeway and across the water and back to town.

He rode furiously, each push on the pedal a punishment, awkward because one hand held the bike and the other held his blazer in his lap and he sweated in the heat of the mid-afternoon, but still he rode. Away from the business centre, away from the schools - his new high school, the girl's school across the road and his old junior school - away from his loveless home and onto the road alongside the Lagoon, careless now of any muddy pools but pleased by the mud, too, wanting each splash of dirty water on his clothing until at last, exhausted, he stopped and lay down on a beach where the sand had hardened with the outgoing tide. And although the patch on his leg had dried, he lay on his stomach to hide it from the world.

'The crack of leather on willow, Bell-thar. You'll come to love it. Everyone loves it,' he thought, the happiness of Cook's voice clear in his ears. And he wept because he was trapped: no matter how he deepened his silence, there was nothing he could do to silence the people around him and there was nothing he could do to avoid the terror of the Pavilion and its terrible, terrible school.

-x-

He came home at five, just as his mother was bringing her laundry off the line. She was small and austere and, because she was working, she had on her green house coat over her skirt and blouse.

"You're late, Belthar. And look at your clothes!"

He'd dreaded this, but he knew it was inevitable. She'd spoken and spoken about how important it was to look after his uniform, about how expensive it had been and how it had to be made to last. "Although I expect you'll grow too fast for that" - as if he was personally responsible for the fact of his adolescence.

"I fell off my bicycle."

"Well, I'm not surprised. You ride that thing like a maniac. I knew I shouldn't have bought it."

But Belthar knew better than to answer, knew that he rode safely and that, for him, his bike was not the adventure it was for the other boys.

"You'd better go and change and you can wash those things yourself. And I think you should do so before you do your homework."

He went into his bedroom and unfolded a pair of cotton shorts and a light shirt from his wardrobe and as he pulled them on he heard her filling the kettle and putting out the cups and the saucers for tea.

He'd known she'd be angry and he hated her anger, wished she'd shout at him like he'd heard other people do. But she was too genteel and too polite and whenever she was cross with him or disappointed in him, she allowed it to simmer and come through in the things she would say. And it frightened him.

She watched him in silence as she waited for the kettle to boil and he made his way through the kitchen and out to the laundry, he with his pants and shirt and underwear rolled into a tight ball to hide any evidence and she with her arms folded and her thin, disapproving mouth folded, too.

He fitted the plugs into the drains of the laundry's stone basin and opened the taps and swished the water around to mix the hot and the cold. Then he plunged his pants and his socks - the darks - into one and the whites into another and left them to soak for a few moments before he took up a bar of soap and started to rub. The front side of the basins leaned outwards and they were ribbed and he pummelled his clothes against them, wish and wash, wish and wash, wish and wash.

"Belthar, you've been at that long enough. Now leave it to soak and come in and drink your tea."

He dried his hands on the old towel which she kept by the basin and folded it and hung it correctly over its rail.

They drank in the kitchen. His mother always made his after-school tea in her traditional brown pot and she kept it warm with a cosy she'd knitted herself. It was the colour of creamy wool and in later life that colour would always remind him of her and make him smile because, more often than not, he enjoyed this ritual.

"A good day at school?"

"It was alright."

"And what does that mean? Did you enjoy it? You must have a lot to tell me after your first day."

The table was covered with an embroidered white cloth which had long since lost its whiteness - although she bleached it all the time - and every one of her thin porcelain plates was chipped and cracked. But everything was set correctly and there was a coiled linen napkin in a battered silver ring at each of their places.

Belthar unrolled his napkin and spread it on his lap and reached for a thick slice of thinly buttered bread from the platter of four which she always prepared for these afternoon teas. He

always ate two. She always delicately ate one and he supposed she ate the other when he'd gone to his room to continue his homework.

This afternoon her bread was fresh and white and warm, so warm that the butter was melting at the edges, and it made him comfortable to eat it.

"Well?"

"It was... nice," he said.

"And?"

"Er..."

"What class are you in? Who is your teacher? What did you do? Come, Belthar, don't you have anything to tell me?" And although she sounded stern, he looked up at her (and he didn't have to look far for she wasn't much taller than him) and he saw that she was smiling.

"Mister Cook," he said.

"Don't know him. Is he new?"

"I don't know."

"One should want to know his background." She was very aware of Backgrounds.

"And this Mister Cook. What does he teach?"

"Cricket."

"Cricket?"

"He's the cricket master."

"Why are you in the cricket class?"

Belthar laughed but the laugh caught in his throat. "No mama," (she never allowed him to call her 'mother' or 'mum' - and he was expected to pronounce it in the French way: "muh-maan"). "He's in charge of the cricket club."

"And you're in the cricket club?"

"No mama."

"I should think not. You're at school to learn, Belthar, to learn. Not to waste the teachers' time. And we wouldn't want your poor late father to have thought that you weren't getting a proper education now, would we?"

"No mama."

She cleared the dishes away after they'd finished and he went back to the laundry to rinse out his washing and then he hung it on the line to dry.

"Now into your room and do your homework while I make you your dinner, Belthar. You do have homework, I presume?"

"Yes mama."

"Off you go then. And I've got a special treat for you tonight to celebrate your first day at school. Meat balls, Belthar. You know you love meat balls."

He hated meat balls but he went into his room and closed his door and sat at his desk and took his books from his satchel and arranged them in piles: his exercise books on the left, his set work books on the right. And he arranged them in the order in which he'd work through them, too: mathematics at the bottom (because that's what he'd tackle last), then science, then biology, then history and English on top. Then he arranged his pencil and his pen and his eraser on the far side of his blotter and he was ready to begin.

But he couldn't begin. Instead he sat paralysed as the day played over and over in his mind. He heard his mother chopping and he smelled the frying of onions and he wanted to be with her in her kitchen and to tell her what had happened to him today but he knew that she'd never permit him to leave his homework just so that he could sit there and tell her his cry-baby stories.

She'd said it too often before: "I don't want to hear it, Belthar. And don't be a cry-baby. You're the man of the house now, Belthar. The man of the house." And she'd also often said, "A gentleman never tells tales, Belthar, he never tells tales." And if he told her about today he knew he'd be guilty of both of those terrible sins.

The books remained unopened in their piles as the afternoon drew into evening. Belthar's window caught the last of the sun and it fell on the pale blue counterpane which covered his bed and the shade of the frames threw patterns on the white of his wall. His mother had always said that the world was perfect at this time of day and he tried to enjoy the growing gold of the light and he tried to listen to the bird chatter of the forest, but all he could see were the assembly hall and the pavilion and all he could hear was the rushing thump of his heart and then he was crying again.

He sat facing his blotter with the tips of his toes just touching the floor and the tears lined his face and he wiped his nose on his sleeve.

He wanted his mother.

But his mother remained on the other side of his door and she'd never come in without knocking.

26. Hibiscus rosa-sinensis

Belthar discovered the place that became his favourite refuge when he made his way to assembly on the second day of school.

Desperate not to be seen but unable to escape, he arrived early and approached the building from a little-used side gate and there, behind the gymnasium, by a formal pond and under an old hibiscus hedge, he found the concrete bench with its wooden seat. Everything was green with age and the fountain was blocked with algae so that its sprinkle of water was just a trickle, but the bright pink of the flowers with their startling red stamens and the opulent, deep green of the leaves appealed to him and soothed him.

The morning was warm with the sun and the hymn of turtle doves and in the distance the happy roar of a field full of blazered boys running and chasing and catching.

But here there was silence.

He removed his unused handkerchief from his pocket - his mother gave him a clean hanky every day, and he could never bring himself to blow his nose on its pressed whiteness - and he wiped the seat carefully, then rinsed the cloth in the pond and spread it out to dry on a stone on the path.

He didn't read, he didn't look at his homework, he didn't make any notes for class. He just sat and waited for the assembly bell.

Presently one or two of the other children passed through the gate and walked quickly along the flagstones and round the corner of the gym but none of them greeted the silent, solitary boy.

He rose promptly when the first bell called, knowing that he now had five minutes to find his place in the hall. It was a torture, walking into that room through those double doors and down that long aisle. Most of the boys were seated already and he felt that the story of his shame had spread to them all and he felt their heads turning to watch him as he passed and he felt the wave of silence as it carved through the crowd and he felt the tittering and the open-mouthed laughter of the boys and he felt his face colour and his neck redden under his tight, starched collar.

The raucous ring of the second bell and the scraping of the chairs as the hall rose for the entrance of the masters, and still Belthar felt as though the entire school was looking at him, staring at his back and laughing, and he hated his position in the front row.

"Let us pray," began Thibault, as he did every day - and would for the next five years of Belthar's life - and as they lowered their heads and closed their eyes the boy felt the tears coming - unwanted, unbidden, ragged tears which angered and shamed him. He looked for his hanky and realised that he'd left it drying in the sun and he wiped his eyes on his sleeve. The boy next to him offered him a crumpled paper towel but he brushed his hand away roughly, wanting only to be left alone.

"That's rude," whispered the boy, loud enough to be heard on the stage so that the headmaster interrupted his speech to glare at them both.

He pointed at Belthar after his booming "ah-men" and said, "You; I'll see you in my office after assembly." And he pointed at the other boy: "And you, too." And began his announcements about sports clubs, litter on the playing field and the start of choir practice this afternoon during lunch break.

"Now look what you've done," said the boy as they made their way out of the hall after singing the closing hymn. "I've never been in trouble at school before. My dad's going to be so angry with me, and all I did was try to help you. What's wrong with you, anyway, why couldn't you just take the tissue?"

But Belthar, angry himself, remained silent.

At The Office the other boy reported to the school secretary and they were made to stand and wait against the wall across the room from Thibault's door. And still Belthar remained silent. He recognised what the boy had done, that it was, indeed, a real act of kindness, and that it might even have lead to a friendship, but his pride and his fear prevented him from saying anything. Not even a thank you.

At last the red light on the doorjamb was turned off and the green one came on, but still they waited, unsure of themselves until a muffled, shouted "Come!" startled them and the other boy lead the way and Belthar followed him silently into the dusty, book-lined sanctum.

"Didn't you see the green light?" asked the headmaster when they'd arranged themselves in front of his wide, leather-covered desk.

Both Belthar and the other boy stared at the maroon backs of the cracked leather armchairs which stood between them and the desk, both too scared to speak.

"Well, didn't you?" Or don't you know what a green light means?"

"No, sir," whispered the other boy.

"What? Speak up, boy, what did you say?"

"No, sir," he said again.

"And you, boy?"

But Belthar remained silent. After a long moment, Thibault continued: "Yes. Mr Cook has told me about you. Got anything to say for yourself?"

And still he remained silent.

Thibault leaned back in his throne-like seat and, making a temple of his thin, parchment-covered hands, allowed his pale blue eyes to rest a while on Belthar's companion. A pretty, blond-haired boy of average height for his age but strong and wiry.

"Your name, boy?"

"White, sir."

"Bruce White? You were victor ludorum at the junior school were you not?"

"Yes, sir," said the boy.

"Your reputation precedes you, White."

"Yes, sir."

"And what sport have you chosen, White?"

"Cricket, sir. And swimming, sir."

"Very good, White, and I expect you'll do very well at both?"

"I'll try, sir."

"Now you listen to me," said the headmaster, softer and gentler now that they were talking sports. "I expect respect from you, especially when we are at prayer, is that clear?" They nodded, Belthar wanting only to keep his vow, the other wanting only to please.

"What could you possibly have found to talk about during prayers?"

"Sir, he was crying," said White.

"Crying?"

"Yes sir."

"And you"?"

"I tried to give him a tissue but he didn't want it, sir."

"And that's what you spoke about?"

"Sir, I just said he was rude."

"And that he is," said Thibault. "Very well, you may go."

"Go?" said the boy, surprised.

"Yes," said the headmaster. "But you, boy," and he pointed at Belthar. "You will stay."

White turned quickly and let himself out and closed the door - taking care not to slam it - and Thibault continued to look levelly at Belthar.

"Now, then, what have you to say for yourself?"

"Don't know, sir," said Belthar.

"You don't know? Well, then, why were you crying?"

"Don't know."

"Are you sick?"

Belthar was silent.

"Do you miss your mother? New boys get homesick sometimes. It's quite natural."

Belthar was silent.

"Talk up, boy, I can't hear you."

But Belthar had nothing to say.

"Very well, as punishment you will take three cuts. Bend over the chair and lift your blazer," and he pulled his cane from an umbrella stand as he walked around his desk, swishing it once, twice through the air.

"But first a prayer."

Belthar stood again and bowed his head but Thibault pushed him roughly from behind. “I don’t recall telling you to rise.

“Now. To prayer. Heavenly Father, bless us as we teach this child his lessons of respect and help us and guide us in our work. We ask this in Jesus’ name. Ah-men.”

He moved the boy’s blazer out of the way, raised his arm and whipped the cane hard onto the boy’s buttocks.

Belthar cried once and jumped, but the headmaster pushed him down again and beat him a second time and a third. And then after a long silence he said, “You may rise and you may go. Straight back to your form room, d’you hear?”

Belthar, sobbing, made no greeting and, rubbing the back of his legs, walked painfully out of the door, his footsteps echoing softly through the empty corridors.

The school building hummed with the drone of its lessons. A teacher’s voice rising briefly and falling, the knock, knock of a chalk duster on a blackboard, the quick tap-tap of a librarian’s heels as she crossed the quadrangle, her arms filled with books, her handbag swinging sensibly from her shoulders.

Belthar watched her go and realised that he was alone in the corridor that lead to from past The Office and through to the school’s wooden front doors and that no one would see him if walked softly towards them and through them and onto the street beyond.

27. Sideroxylon inerme

He walked until he got to the water. The water was low and it was still running out but Belthar knew that it was almost full moon and he guessed, correctly, that today was spring tide. 'Good,' he thought. 'That means the coaster will leave this afternoon,' and he looked up at the wind. Easterly. Good. That meant there'd be no swell and the little ship would easily cross the bar.

Amazed that no one had stopped him and now free and with the entire day ahead of him, he decided to row across the water and explore the far bank for the rest of the day. He knew he'd be punished for bunking but he'd worry about that tomorrow.

For now he was free.

He found his father's old clinker pulling boat at its mooring on the mud and brought the oars out from where he'd always hidden them on a girder under the railway bridge where it crossed the Lagoon. He took off his shoes and socks and his blazer and his tie and folded them neatly onto one of the thwarts and he untied the mooring rope and rolled up his trouser legs above his knees.

Getting the boat down to the water was hard work. It was heavy and long, but Belthar had moved it often before and he paced himself to ease the load: pull a while and rest, pull and rest until the hull was floating and his feet felt the pleasant cold of the water. Then, carefully washing the black mud from between his toes, he climbed into the boat and, picking up one of the thick wooden oars, began to punt his way into the channel until the water was deep enough to row.

By now it was almost ten o'clock - low spring tide always came at ten in the morning - and he didn't have to struggle against the tidal race. But he knew that he'd better move quickly because it would take him an hour or more to reach the opposite beach and by then the tide would have turned and the stream would be very much stronger.

He rowed steadily and expertly. The Lagoon had always been his haven, comfortable and familiar, and he loved the solitude of the wide open water, the silence of hunting for bait on the low mud flats, the contemplation of fishing.

Summer's easterly began blowing during the late part of the morning and Belthar sensed that today it would blow stronger than usual. He couldn't feel the wind as he set out but the calm mirror of the water was breaking up and by the time he was half way across it was starting to blow and it began pushing the boat and this made rowing easier. And he knew, too, that he'd have to stay on the far side until it died down in the late afternoon; he wasn't strong enough to pull alone into the wind when it blew like that.

Belthar tried not to think about the afternoon. For now he was alone and he was on the water and that was enough.

The boat thudded gently onto the beach on the western bank. Here where it was closer to the mouth and the sea, the sand was golden white and today it lay unmarked by footprints. A gull looked up expectantly, lifted itself easily and slowly and called softly once, twice; mournful and hopeful. But it saw that he had nothing and it settled back just as lazily, ruffling its tail and folding its wings as it landed.

Belthar pulled the boat onto the hard and wrapped the rope around the branch of a milkwood which hung low over the sand and sat down on the ground to rest. He felt the rough, block-like, corky bark of the tree against his back and he rubbed his feet and hands into the warm, dry sand. He was streaked with sweat and his shirt was wet and he enjoyed the cool of the wind and the heat of the sun as he looked about him and waited for his clothes to dry.

He saw no movement on the Lagoon, no boats out fishing and, from this distance, no movement in the town or at the wharf, either. From here it looked peaceful, a cat dozing in the sun.

He watched for a few minute's more but he was energised and soon he was up and walking. The base of the high dunes on the western bank was covered with milkwood forests, but under their thick, leathery leaves the ground was open and only a few patches of soft, low, herb-like plants grew in their shade. The going was easy and he enjoyed the feel of the ground on his bare feet as he chose a game path which followed a contour just above the waterline and brought him quickly to the sandstone cliffs that defined the mouth of the Lagoon. Now he could hear the lap of the waves and he felt the air salty and delicious on his face, and he came out from under the milkwoods' shade and dropped down onto the beach once more.

The sky was hazy from the salt spray. At the end of the beach he climbed onto a rocky platform where a pair of oyster catchers had their open nest. Startled, they flew away, screeching and jet black against the water's dirty green; but Belthar wasn't interested in them and they returned as soon as he passed.

Now he climbed down again onto a pebbly beach which lay in a little bay that was guarded on the far side by two white, pyramid-shaped rocks where cormorants and ibises, herons and darters roosted and squabbled. The wind brought their noise to him and the stench of their fish and he hurried away. Past the rocks, he climbed up into the forests again and scrambled up and up until he came to a clearing and now he dropped to the ground once more to rest.

Here he was protected from the wind and it was warm and he lay on his back and closed his eyes until he thought he could see little clouds of red from the heat of the sun on the insides of his eyelids. It was past midday and he was hungry but he had nothing to eat so he ignored his stomach and focussed on the fun he was having in his head. Soon he became aware of tiny colourless forms which swam into his view and he watched them as they rose and fell, rose and fell, amused that he could see them even with his eyes shut tight. He lay until the heat had dried his shirt and his trousers and then he stood again and began to walk, skirting a little ridge and onto a path and down again into a series of shallow caves, a natural colonnade at the edge of the sea. This was one of his favourite places and from here he could usually look across the mouth and see the coastline stretching away in marching rows of forest-covered capes, but today the view was hidden by the haze.

The caves were cool even in the heat of summer and their walls were black with algae and their floors were sharp with broken shells and stone chips which, Belthar knew, were all that was left of a tool factory from a recent stone age. In the wood-and-glass showcases of the town's museum they were dry and dusty but here they were wet and alive, and he dropped to his knees to look for a complete arrowhead, a knife or an axe to take home and keep. He sifted through the stones and the sand and scratched deeper and deeper into the midden until he'd got a good specimen and then he sat back to watch the waves and the sea. He noticed that the tide had risen almost to the mouth of the cave and, scared that he'd be trapped there, rose and walked quickly round the point and ducked through a natural tunnel and stepped onto a path which wound in a wide arc around and up a little valley and brought him out onto the roof of the caves. From here he looked back and saw the town and, only a little way off now, the coastal steamer as it made its way quickly towards the mouth.

He watched as it came closer, its funnel pouring a steady stream of smoke which disappeared almost immediately in the wind, its bow wave lost in the chop of the Lagoon. Just before the mouth it came almost to a stop and Belthar could see the captain looking through his binoculars as he waited for the pilot to come aboard. Soon a rowing boat not much bigger than his own put out from the jetty on the eastern shore and made its way quickly across the water with four men pulling at four long, thick-bladed oars and another - the pilot - seated in the prow.

The men climbed a ladder onto the steamer and fastened the boat with a towing line and Belthar watched as the pilot went up to the bridge and took the wheel. He knew that he'd set a course using a white beacon on the headland and another red-and-white beacon set back on an island in the middle of the Lagoon and he watched as he aligned the ship to cross the bar.

'If she's going out it must be close to four o'clock,' he thought. 'High tide.' And he stayed long enough to see the pilot and his crew climb back into their boat and begin their row back into the mouth. Easy work, for once, with no swell.

Warmed by the sun, Belthar made his way back down hill and by the time he came to the water he was sweating and he stripped and dived delighted into the ocean's gentle cool.

He laughed as he swam, shouted and whooped as he splashed and slapped at the water around him and when he was cold he ran up the beach to lie naked and dry in the sun, to enjoy its warmth one last time before it disappeared behind the dune.

He heard the voice as he flopped down.

"So, this is where the little brat hangs out. Run away from school did we? Everyone's been out looking for you. Think you can just come here and enjoy yourself swimming while everyone else has to waste their afternoon on a search party, do you?"

"Shorty," said Belthar, petrified.

"You owe me an apology, slag," said the older boy.

"For what?"

"You made Cookie and Featherstone shit on me at cricket yesterday."

"I made them?"

"You made them do it." The boy began to shout and Belthar, afraid, tried to reach for his clothes.

"Stay where you are, slag."

"My clothes..."

"I said, stay where you are."

Belthar looked at him but quickly turned away, avoiding his anger.

"If you hadn't sat in the wrong place yesterday I wouldn't have had to punish you and none of this would have happened."

"But I..."

Shorty glared at the younger boy and, working himself up still further, shouted, "You obviously didn't have enough yesterday, did you?" and grabbed Belthar's hair and pulled his head back and said. "Stand up!" and pushed him to his feet.

"Now walk," he said, his voice hoarse. He steered Belthar towards the trees where it was dark and hidden, the younger boy holding his back and arms stiff, his neck stretched to avoid the pain at the roots of his hair.

They stopped in the half light under the milkwood trees and the older boy swung Belthar around to face him and pushed down on his shoulders. "On your knees, slag."

Belthar knelt as Shorty fumbled at his belt and the buttons of his trousers. Both boys were shaking and Belthar could see the erection pushing against the fabric of the older boy's pants.

"What are you doing?" he cried.

"Nothing," said Shorty, laughing, nervous, his voice juddering as he allowed his trousers and his underpants to fall. "Now suck me, slag," he said, gripping Belthar's head with his hands and pushing his penis against the youngster's tightly shut mouth, rubbing it against his nose and his cheek and against his eye and pushing it against the ridge of his brow.

"Suck me!"

Belthar shook his head, his face wet with his tears, the cold, white fear rising and rising. "Please, no," he said. "I don't want to."

"You do, you little queer, of course you want it. I saw how you were looking at me yesterday."

"No!" cried Belthar, trying to pull back. "I wasn't looking at you. Please, no."

But still Shorty pushed closer and Belthar gagged against the fishy mustiness of his skin. He rubbed himself against Belthar, working his hips from side to side and pushing himself against Belthar's face. Suddenly he pulled away and gripped Belthar's jaw and forced his mouth open with his thumb and forefinger, driving himself between the younger boy's lips.

Belthar choked and struggled but the thing had filled his mouth and beat against the back of his throat. The sound of Shorty moaning and again Belthar tried to pull away and again he gagged and still he smelled Shorty's sweat and then Shorty was thrusting forward and back, forward and back, the roughness of the shaft as it pushed in and out, in and out, the roughness of Shorty's hands against the back of his head. Belthar's jaw ached and he felt an acid taste in his mouth and then he snapped sideways and vomited violently, the yellow, spit-filled bile splashing over the older boy's pants and shoes and onto the dappled, leafy ground.

"You little shit!" screamed the teenager. "Now look what you've done, you've dirtied me."

But Belthar's eyes were closed, his head shaking. "No, please, no," he begged. "Please. Please," and he felt Shorty's fingers in his hair once more.

"Clean me up."

"No, please, no, please stop it, leave me alone, please, please."

"Clean me up!" shouted the boy, pushing Belthar's head to the ground. "Lick me clean!"

Belthar shook his head, "No," and he kept his mouth closed and his eyes shut as Shorty forced his face onto his shoes and rubbed him into his vomit.

Suddenly the teenager stopped and let go of his hair. "You pathetic little queer," he said, stepping back. Belthar fell to his side, felt the cold of the compost beneath him and shivered and curled himself into a ball.

"Look at me!"

But Belthar shut his eyes again and leaned his head into the ground and for a long moment there was silence. Then Shorty laughed and Belthar looked up again and the boy was standing over

him, a dark shadow against the forest's patchy canopy, smiling down at him, stroking himself, his right hand gripping his penis, his left rubbing back and forward across its tip.

Now he reached down and caught Belthar by the arm and lifted him and turned him onto his back and, kneeling, forced the younger boy's legs apart.

Belthar screamed, his face wet with snot and tears and vomit, his skin blotched with dried leaves and clods of black sand.

The teenager pushed himself against Belthar and Belthar shouted again and tried to crawl away, a desperate backstroke on the rough soil of the forest floor, but the older boy was heavier and stronger and he held him with one hand as he felt for his penis with the other. Now he had Belthar's legs on his shoulders and he wrapped one arm around them, pressing them against his chest and the fabric of his shirt as he tried to enter the younger boy from behind, but Belthar's hole wouldn't open and Shorty hawked and spat on his hand and rubbed himself with the spit and thrust once more and this time the boy's rectum yielded and he was in.

Belthar's screaming stopped with the shock and the pain and then it began again: rising terror, absolute violation, endless shame. This pain could never be real and he cried louder as Shorty grunted and pushed but there was no one to hear or to help and after an endless time he felt Shorty's thighs against the backs of his legs and then the relief as he began to withdraw and then the shock again as he pushed back once more.

Again and again and again the thing rammed into him, again and again and again the older boy hit up against him. Shorty's eyes were closed and his face was pulled in on itself and Belthar saw the ecstasy as he pushed faster and faster. He tried to look at the sky, he tried to concentrate on the trees and the noises of the surf and the bird calls around him, but all he could hear was Shorty's ragged breath and the wet slap of his skin and all he could see was Shorty's shape dark against the trees and the sky.

"Take me, fucker," shouted the teenager. "You like it, I can tell," until he shuddered and yawled, once, holding himself against Belthar, clutching his legs and heaving air through his mouth.

His head on the ground, the burning and pain still inside him, Belthar closed his eyes on his tears. "Leave me alone," he sobbed. "Just leave me alone."

Suddenly Shorty bent forward and pushed his mouth against Belthar's, his lips apart, his tongue probing, his spit like salt, his stubble of beard scratching the smoothness of the younger boy's face.

Belthar turned his head but the teenager was finished and suddenly he laughed.

"You taste like puke, you little queer," he said, standing and pulling up his shorts and his trousers and turning to walk away, buttoning his flies as he went.

28. Celtis africana

It was dark in the kitchen when Belthar finished his low and flat and emotionless speech, and the only sounds were the thrumming of the fridge and, from somewhere in the forests, the hoo-hoo-hoo of a nightjar as it puffed itself up and readied itself to begin its trilling call, its 'Good-lord-deliver-us, Good-lord-deliver-us'

The blackness hid them from one another and after a long silence Storm rose to switch on the light. She had nothing to offer the old man but when she sat again he could see that she'd been crying.

"Belthar," she said. "Have you ever told anyone about any of this?"

He shook his head.

"My god, you've been living with this all these years?"

He nodded.

"Who did this to you, Belthar? Who did this?"

He shook his head again.

"Please, Belthar, tell me. You need to talk about these things. How old were you then?"

"Thirteen."

"And now?"

Belthar was silent, drained.

"How old are you now, Belthar?"

"Sixty two."

"Forty nine years. You've held this in for forty nine years?"

He nodded.

"Jesus, Belthar. Jesus. How do you live with it?" She stared at him, his eyes on the tablecloth, his hand stroking the fabric smooth. "What did you do. Afterwards, I mean?"

"Went home."

"What? You just went home?"

"What was I supposed to do?"

"Didn't you tell anyone? A doctor? Your mother?"

"He called me queer, Storm. And maybe I was one."

"What? You? Gay?"

"Queer."

"That's ridiculous."

"I didn't want anyone to know. I was scared he'd tell."

"But you aren't gay. Are you?"

"No. But he was going to tell."

"Jesus, Belthar. Didn't you get any help? You should have asked for help."

"My mother punished me when I got home. She made me do extra duties for the rest of the term and I had to do detention after school every day, too."

"Your mother punished you?"

"Yes, but I never told her."

"What did she punish you for?"

"Bunking. And my clothes were ruined."

"And what was the detention all about?"

"Because I ran away and they sent the matrics and the teachers out to search for me."

"And what about Shorty?"

"Saw him every day afterwards," he said, resentful.

"Didn't you ever confront him?"

"I wanted him to like me, Storm."

"You wanted him to like you?"

"So that he wouldn't do it again."

"And did he? Try anything, I mean."

"No. Never."

The fridge switched itself off and in the exaggerated silence they heard a bushbuck cough and the soft crrk-crrk of a cricket and the padding of a moth flying against the light. From the white

stinkwood tree beyond the back door a turtle dove called, unusual in the dark, called once and waited for an answer from somewhere far away.

"Belthar," she said, "have you ever married?"

"No."

"And girlfriends?"

"No."

"You've lived alone all your life?"

"Lived with my mother 'til she died."

She laughed. "Sorry, Belthar. It isn't funny. I don't know why I'm laughing."

"That was a long time ago. It's over now."

"It isn't over, Belthar," she said, her nervousness suddenly under control. "It will never be over. I know. You never get over it. You just learn to live with it."

"It's over."

"No, it isn't and you need help, Belthar."

He shook his head.

"Didn't you talk to your doctors about it when you were being treated for your depression?"

"No."

"I'm the first person you've told?"

"Yes," he said, simply, and his shoulders were slumped and he looked to her suddenly very, very old.

"You poor man," she said, rising and coming round the table to wrap her arms around him. "You poor, poor man."

29. Lavendula dentata

Belthar woke the next morning to the grey of the rain but he was used to his routine so he pulled on an old coat and a hat and went out into his garden to work. He raked his paths neat and clipped away some of the branches of the trees that had begun to grow over his fence and he started a half a dozen different things but he couldn't get into the rhythm of the day. 'Damn woman,' he thought. 'Why'd she make me talk like that?' and he threw down his shears and, leaving them just where they lay, collected his basket, locked his house and went down his new formal path and through his old gate and turned left onto his street.

He was angry and he walked fast, but he was healthy and strong and he quickly reached the town and then walked along the main street and turned left again into the arcade and through the parking area and into the nursery.

"Hello, Belthar," said Jill as he entered the cool darkness of the shop. "How you doing today?"

"Thought you'd know," he said.

"Beg pardon?"

"Hasn't your sister told you about me?"

"No," she said, sincere. "Told me what?"

"Haven't you seen her today?"

"Of course I've seen her today. She's here at work. Out in the potting shed, I think."

"Hasn't said anything?"

"No, Belthar. About what? Did something happen to you?"

"Never mind," he said, knowing that he was rude but too angry to care, and he went in to the back to look for Storm.

"Belthar!" She was pleased to see him. "I wasn't expecting you. How are you? And look at you walking in the rain." She was sitting on a tall stool in front of a potting bench made of old scaffold planks tied together with heavy fencing wire and balanced on two rusted oil drums. She wore a pair of yellow leather gloves, stained from the soil, and a dark green jersey, a man's pullover, torn at the shoulder and fraying at the cuffs and pulled in at the waist by a belt for a holster for her pruning shears. Her hair was trapped under a dirty red scarf and she'd wiped a smear of mud across her forehead. On the bench stood a tray of newly rooted cuttings which she was transferring into individual plastic pots. Her baby was lying on his stomach in a play pen by her side, banging a rattle against the face of his teddy.

"Came to say I'm sorry."

"Sorry?"

"For telling you all those things."

"Belthar, there's nothing to be sorry for. That sort of pain... I just can't believe that you haven't told anybody else."

"Yes, well. Just make sure you don't."

"Belthar! I wouldn't think of it. You know that."

"Do I?"

"Trust me, Belthar. I'm not a gossip. I'd only tell anyone if you asked me to, I promise." She pointed to her work. "Do you like geraniums?"

"What's geraniums got to do with it?"

"Belthar," she said, gently, smiling at him, her head tilting to the side. "Don't be angry with me. Don't be angry with you. It's all right. It's OK," and she stood up, a shower of spilled soil falling away from her apron. "Come. You're wet and cold. Let's go into the shop and get some tea. You look like you could do with some. And we'll talk about something else, OK? Have you got your planting plan here? Are you ready to start ordering your plants? We can buy them in bulk from the wholesalers, you know."

The shop was filled with boxes of new stock which had arrived that morning and she moved some of them aside to make space for him. He sat awkwardly on a little wooden bench that stood sideways to the desk where Jill was working at her bookkeeping. "I could help you with that, if you want," he said, suddenly finding himself in a good mood. "Always been a bookkeeper."

"I hate this stuff," said Jill. "Could you really?"

"No he couldn't," said Storm, "because we couldn't afford to pay him."

"Wouldn't have to pay me," he said.

Jill looked at her sister. "I really could do with the help," she said. "I'm sure Belthar knows a lot more about it than I do."

"Been doing it all my life," repeated the old man.

"But now you're retired and you're a gardener," said Storm. "No Belthar, I wouldn't feel right."

"I'm not asking for payment but I'll do it if it'll help," he said, surprising himself. Why would he suddenly want to help?

"OK. But only if we can at least pay you in plants," said Storm, and Belthar laughed and said that would be fine.

"I can come in one morning a week. That ought to do it," he said. "Be nice to have a routine again. Could start right now, if you want."

The kettle had boiled and Storm went into an alcove to make the tea. Belthar stood and went round the desk to look over Jill's shoulder at what she was doing. "Here," he said. "Let me sit there." And after a moment: "What a mess."

Now it was Jill's turn to laugh. "Told you I didn't know what I was doing," she said, but Belthar was already absorbed and Storm beckoned to her to come outside.

"Leave him to work," she whispered when they were out of earshot. "He looks happy doing it, doesn't he?"

"What happened to him last night?" asked Jill.

"Please don't ask me," said her sister. "He just told me stuff, OK? But don't ask me about it."

"OK, but is he alright?"

"Better than he's ever been, I should think. Now go in and show him what you've done. He'll need to know where you've filed everything and where to find your receipt books and things."

They worked that way for the rest of the morning, Storm in the potting shed and Jill and Belthar in the office. When they heard River crying Jill and Belthar looked at each other and rose from their seats without a word and went out to the shed where they found that Storm was changing him. They all made a fuss of him and soon he was happy again and everyone carried on with their work. No one came in to disturb them - it wasn't unusual for a rainy day to pass without a single customer - and at lunch they decided to close for an hour while Jill went to collect her daughter from school and Storm and Belthar went to the coffee shop for a bowl of soup.

Belthar, gentleman Belthar, insisted on pushing River's pram and the baby fell asleep before they'd walked half a block.

"Want to talk about my garden now?" he asked as they mopped the last of their meal with slices of thick, crusty bread, fresh and warm. He wiped his hands on his napkin and rearranged it neatly again on his lap and reached into his back pocket and brought out his folded, photocopied planting plan and spread it out on the table between them.

"You always plant the big stuff first," she said, "the trees and the hedges and things. Then the perennials. Then the annuals."

"What's this *Buxus macowanii*?"

"It's Cape box," she said. "It's a small-leaved, slow growing hedge that's easy to keep trimmed. I know we spoke about using rosemary for the parterres, but I think Cape box would be better."

"Smell?" he asked.

"Smell?"

"Yes, does it have a nice smell?"

"No," she said. "Not really."

"And nice flowers?"

"No, not really. They're small and insignificant. I thought you'd get your colour from the annuals."

"Then it's not the right plant," he said.

"But I chose it because it's indigenous and it's so similar to the European box. That's what they use for most of the topiary you see in their gardens," she said. "But sure, we can change it if you want."

"I want something with a nice smell and nice flowers. I want beautiful things around me, Storm. Never had beautiful things around me."

"What about the rosemary, then?" she asked. "Or lavender?"

"Can you grow lavender here?"

"'Course you can," she said. "Although it's not indigenous."

"That important?"

"Well, yes. It is to me. Indigenous plants use less water."

"And lavender, does it need a lot of water?"

"No, not really," she said. "And I suppose that kind of destroys my argument, doesn't it?"

Belthar laughed again. "What about trimming it?" he asked. "Is it easy to trim?"

"Yes," she said. "But it grows a lot faster than box. It'll need a lot more work and I suppose you'd want to stop cutting it back in summer to allow it to flower."

"So it wouldn't be neat all year round, then?"

"No, it wouldn't."

"That could be quite nice, then," he said. "Couldn't it?"

She laughed. "Belthar, that doesn't sound like you."

"No," he said, laughing, too. "It doesn't, does it?"

-x-

River woke and she opened a bottle of Purity and tied on his bib and took him from his pram and began to feed him. She looked at Belthar and said, "Do you want to do this?"

"No."

The baby forced some of the creamy, fruity mess out of his mouth and she collected it with the spoon and fed it back to him. 'That's revolting,' thought Belthar. 'But at least it's better than the breast feeding.'

But the truth was that he enjoyed watching the two of them together and he couldn't stop himself from leaning across the table and taking the baby's tiny fingers in his own. River patted at his hand and smiled and Belthar felt a swell in his throat.

River was cotton and softness and he was a beautiful child, sunny and happy, and he gave Belthar a baby giggle and that made him choke on his food and Storm patted his back. Belthar pulled up, shocked, but Storm said, "Don't worry about it. They do that all the time."

"Is he going to be alright?"

"Course he is. Learning to eat, you're bound to make a few mistakes, don't you think?" and she smiled her Storm smile and tilted her head to one side.

When River caught his breath again he sat for a moment and looked at his mother and then he began to yell. Belthar leaned forward and took his pink and pointy hand again and the baby quietened immediately and smiled.

"Do you still wonder if he knows that he loves you?" she said.

Belthar shook his head. "I know, Storm."

"Well shit, Belthar, I didn't even have to fight you for that one."

"Don't swear in front of him, Storm. It's not right." And Storm laughed so long and so loud that the other diners were forced to look up and stare.

"It wasn't funny," said Belthar. "Don't know what you're laughing about."

"I'm laughing about the most intensely private man who's coming out of his shell and falling in love with his almost-a-grandchild and getting all protective over him. And I'm laughing because I'm happy, Belthar, because I'm surrounded by the people I adore. And because you're one of them."

And Belthar began to blush.

Suddenly she stood up and put River's blanket over Belthar's shoulder and handed him the baby and said, "Here. You wind him."

Belthar panicked. "But I don't know what to do!"

"You do. Just hold him like you are and pat his back."

Belthar breathed deep and caught River's baby smell and leaned his head to touch against the baby's own and he patted and smoothed, patted and smoothed until he heard a tiny, delicate "bll-eh."

Storm smiled. "See?" she said. "You're a natural. Do you want me to take him now?"

Belthar shook his head and continued to pat.

"Belthar," she said, "we need to talk about last night."

"No, Storm."

"Yes, Belthar, we do. I suppose you know I didn't sleep at all thinking about what we spoke about. About me and about you and your..."

He stopped his patting and his hand rested gently on River's little back. "I'm not going to talk about it, Storm. Not in front of him."

"Belthar, this is about love and healing. I don't want to talk about violence and I don't want revenge or anything. But we both have to deal with our stuff, you know?"

"I've dealt with it."

"No, you haven't."

"Nothing doing, Storm, I'm not talking about it."

"Belthar, have you ever had sex?"

"I beg your pardon? How dare you...?"

"That was the only time, wasn't it, Belthar?"

He started to hand the baby back to her but she put out her hand to stop him. "No, Belthar, you're right, I had no right to ask you that. I'm sorry."

He sat back against the cushion of the banquette. "It's none of your business, Storm."

"I know Belthar, I'm sorry, I really am. But we do need to talk about it, and I'm not going to ask you again but I am going to ask you this: what about you, Belthar? Don't you want to see the guy who did this to you burn? Don't you want revenge?"

"Never thought about it."

"Well?"

"Wouldn't even know where to begin."

"Do you still remember who it was?"

He nodded.

"Do you remember his name?"

He nodded.

"Can you find him? Do you know where he lives? Does he still live here?"

He nodded again.

"Would you tell me?"

"I don't know."

"You can still lay a charge, you know. It's never too late."

"What? With the police? They'd just laugh at me."

"They wouldn't, you know. They have special people to handle this kind of thing."

"And you want me to go through all of that? And I'm a man. Technically you can't rape a man." And that was the second time he'd ever said the word and suddenly he was overcome. He handed the child to the mother and put his head in his hands and his shoulders heaved and he wept.

She was right; he'd never made love to anyone, had never had sex. He thought of the years when he was younger and the pressure inside had become too much and he'd touched himself illicitly, guilty every time, every time wondering if it was because he'd enjoyed some secret pleasure from what Shorty had done to him. But he hadn't enjoyed it. Of course he hadn't. It was frightening and degrading, violent and painful and it left him sore in every part of him and smaller than he'd ever been, smaller and more ashamed than he'd ever felt. Ever before or ever since.

But it was a shame of which he'd eventually become almost totally unaware, and now that he'd spoken about it he realised that it had coloured almost everything he'd ever done and everything he'd ever tried to do and, even, everything he'd ever failed to do.

And he realised that she was right, too, about what had happened to him in that forest almost a lifetime ago: he hadn't ever really thought about it. He hadn't, to use her expression, ever dealt with it.

All he'd ever done was remember it.

"Belthar?"

He shook his head.

"Look at me, Belthar."

But he couldn't.

Storm lifted her baby and put his feet on the table and helped him stand up against Belthar's lowered head, and River put his hands on Belthar and patted the way babies do.

"Look at me, Belthar."

And then he had to look up and he was looking directly into the baby's face and she said, "This is why you have to fight it every single day, Belthar. Because of him. And because of me. And because there are people who love you, Belthar.

"There are."

30. Nymphaea capensis

Belthar's plants arrived by truck on the morning of his sixty third birthday. The driver and his crew off-loaded them and arranged them in neat rows of ten so that Belthar could check them against his list. They made a satisfying sight, he thought, the lines of lavenders in their black nursery bags and the bright yellow pansies and blue and white alyssum in their white seedling trays.

"Wait here while I get you a check," he said when they were done and he was satisfied that he'd receive everything he'd ordered.

"It's been already been paid for," said the driver.

"What?"

"Storm paid me for your stuff when I delivered hers. I went there first."

"Storm. How much was it? How much was my share?"

"Don't know," said the driver. "There were two delivery notes but only one invoice. You'll have to ask her. I'm just the delivery boy."

"Exactly what I'm going to do," said Belthar as the man climbed into his cab.

They'd worked out that he needed four hundred lavenders ("You can plant them quite close," she'd said, "about forty centimetres apart") and twenty eight trays of each colour of seedling and it took him most of the rest of morning to load them onto his barrow and wheel them into his garden. This time, though, he took care to water them immediately and he waited until after he'd finished to phone her.

"Happy birthday," she said when she came on the line.

"Why did you pay for my plants?" he asked.

"That was our agreement," she said. "We'd swap you plants for bookkeeping."

"But I've only done one morning."

"Don't worry about it. A birthday present. And besides, you'll work it off."

"Can't accept that," he said.

"Please, Belthar, we can argue about it later. I've got bad news."

"Bad news?"

"Yes, Belthar. I'm sorry, I wanted to come round to tell you, but now that I've opened my big mouth I'll just have to tell you on the phone, I guess."

"What is it, Cath?"

"Belthar, it's Edward Passmore. Your old boss. He died. He had a heart attack last night."

Belthar sat back onto his bed and let the receiver fall. He heard her calling - "Belthar, Belthar, are you alright? Answer me, Belthar, are you alright?" - her voice distorted by the telephone until at last she screamed "BELTHAR!" and he picked up the receiver again and put it back to his ear.

"I'm here," he said.

"Are you OK?"

"It's quite a shock, Storm."

"I know, Belthar. I know. Do you want me to come round there? I can borrow Jill's car."

"No, I'm alright."

"You were very fond of him, weren't you?

"Knew him all my life," said Belthar. "Worked for him for nearly forty years. He was only a few years older than me."

"Sure you don't want me to come round?"

"No, Storm, I'm alright. When's the funeral, d'you know?"

"Thursday," she said. "Next week Thursday at three. I'll go with you."

-x-

It took Belthar five days to plant his garden. He'd ordered two truck loads of compost and he worked quickly to wheel it in and spread it, forking it over and sprinkling the soil with bone meal just as Storm had said he should do. The clay became easier to work when it mixed with the compost and on the day before the plants were delivered, he finished his preparations by raking the beds and flattening them into a satisfying, level tilth.

Then he took his string and his nails and used them to draw the patterns for his parterre. That took him the longest time - almost an entire day - and when he was finished and he looked down on them from his verandah they looked to him like four painfully thin snakes trapped within four oblong cages and curling gracefully around inside them. But they were exact and symmetrical and that pleased him.

She came to visit on the evening of the third day, her day off, and she looked at what he'd done and said it was perfect. Then she helped him to place the lavenders in their lines along the string. He'd made a measuring stick; he'd measured the bags - they were 15 centimetres across - and the stick was precisely 25 centimetres long. So, he said, if each bag was 15 centimetres wide and the plants grew exactly in the middle, then, when they were measured with his stick and planted in the ground, their centres would be exactly 40 centimetres apart.

Storm laughed. "You don't have to be so precise, Belthar," she said.

"You look at those pictures in the book," said Belthar. "They're precise aren't they?"

"Yes, but once the branches grow into one another nobody'll even see where the stems come out of the ground."

"I'll know," he said, tugging one of the bags into its precise position. "It has to be perfect for me."

With the preparation he'd put into the soil, she said, he didn't need to dig a separate hole for each individual plant - "Just make them as big as the bags" - so the planting itself was quick. He had all the lavenders in place by the end of the fourth morning and the pansies by the end of that day. And at the end of every session of work he collected the used bags and seed trays (those that hadn't been broken) and folded and stacked them and put them aside for Storm and her nursery. The rest he threw away.

He planted the alyssums on the fifth day, the day before Edward Passmore's funeral, and gave the beds a final smoothing over and cleared away the last of the seed trays and then he stood back and looked at his work.

Something missing, he thought, just as the child waved to him from his gate. "Hello Belthar!" she said. "Came to see how you're getting along. Storm says you're planting parties."

"Peanut," he said, pleased to see her. "How did you get here?"

"With Storm. She's coming but she walks too slow." She tilted her head. "C'n I come in?"

"Wait there," he said, "I'll open the gate for you."

"But I can do that."

"I know you can," he said, smiling. "But a gentleman always opens the gate for a lady," and he bowed deeply as he lifted the latch.

He was still bowing as she came through the gate and snaked her arms around his neck. He hugged her and lifted hear easily, kissing her cheeks.

She leaned back to look at his face. "You tickle," she said.

He laughed. "Haven't shaved."

"That's a first," said Storm, arriving at the gate. "Only time I've ever seen you unshaven was when you were sick. But you're clearly not sick. Why haven't you shaved?"

"Why should I?" he said, smiling again. "I'm retired. Working in my garden. No one's going to see me. Why should I shave?" and he knelt to let the child to the ground.

"Fantastic," said Storm. "You look fantastic. Really fit and healthy. And happy. I don't think I've ever seen you like this."

"I am well," he said. "Never happier. And look. It's finished."

"It is indeed," she said. "And it's beautiful, Belthar. Beautiful. Well done. Congratulations."

"It's all thanks to you, Storm," he said. "So much help."

"No, I didn't do anything, really. You did all the hard work. Don't thank me."

They started up the path together and Storm said, "Now all you need is a focal point here where the paths cross. A fountain or something."

"That's exactly it," said Belthar. "Knew something was missing. Needs a focal point."

"I knew that, too, that's why I've brought this catalogue," and she pulled a thick brochure from her handbag. "This'll be the finishing touch, so you'll have to choose carefully."

The book was filled with line drawings and out-of-focus, black-and-white photographs of concrete statues, pillars, pilasters, balustrades and ponds and leafing through it confused him. "Which one?" he said, handing it back to her.

"I've thought of that, too," she said, turning to a page near the back. "Here. How about this?"

She showed him a drawing of a plain bowl that was about 2 metres across. In its middle stood a simple, short column bearing a smaller, more ornate bowl - and in the centre of that stood a heavy finial decorated with a classical pattern of acanthus leaves. "Looks perfect," he said. "Can you order it? How much will it cost?"

"Actually, I already have," she said. "They delivered it to the nursery this morning, but don't worry if you don't want it. We'll be able to sell it."

"Woman's wiles," he said. "So tell me, if you've got it all arranged, how're you going to get it here?"

"It's too big for you to move on your own. I'll ask one of the garden services to deliver it and install it for you, if you like. Course I'll have to find out what they'll charge."

"That's fine, Storm. Let them do it. I'll pay. Just get them to do it. Tomorrow maybe?"

Now it was her turn to laugh. "You really are in a good mood. Can I use your phone? I'll call Eden, they work in this area. See what they can do."

-x-

Belthar was amused. 'Never seen anyone look more like a bunch of garden gnomes,' he thought when the crew from Eden Landscape Garden Services arrived on the morning of the funeral. Five stocky, hairy little men, all in their middle ages, all of them with paunches, all of them wearing muddy green overalls. The smallest and eldest of them did all the talking - and Belthar thought he'd never heard anyone talk more.

"Right, then," he said when he'd introduced himself and his men. "We're putting the fountain here are we, ay? Directly in the middle ay? That's it, is it, ay?"

"Make sure it's exact," said Belthar.

"Exact? That's exactly what we do. Everything exact. Now here's how we're going to do it. What we're going to do is we're going to ..."

Belthar held up his hand, desperate to escape. "Have to go and change," he said, "funeral today," and he turned abruptly and went into the house.

Doesn't matter how they do it, he thought. Just as long as they do it.

He took out his dark suit from its place in his cupboard and his black leather shoes from their place on the rack and went into the laundry to brush and polish. When he came back he looked out of his bedroom window and saw that the gnomes had dug a shallow hole and that they'd levelled the soil for the basin and that four of them had unloaded the heavy bowl from their truck and were now puffing and sweating it up his path. The fifth gnome, the speaker, was mixing a batch of plaster in a wheelbarrow, turning it over heavily and slopping cement on the new, raked gravel - but Belthar found, to his surprise, that he really didn't care.

He'll clean it up, he thought. Or I will if he doesn't. But I'll worry about that tomorrow.

He chose a striped, bright navy-and-maroon necktie - not a funeral tie, but it matched his mood - and, not needing to look as he knotted it, watched as the men pulled and pushed the heavy bowl into place. They checked the distances from the edges to the corners of his beds and they checked that it stood level on the ground before they stamped the soil back into place and raked the gravel up to the grey edges of the bowl. Now the others went out to their truck to fetch the rest of the fountain and the leader brought his barrow closer, spilling more of the plaster on the gravel. When they arrived he set the pillar and the small bowl and the finial in their beds of mortar and, wiping his hands on the seat of his overalls, stepped back to look at his work just as Belthar came out of his front door.

"Reckon that'll do it," he said. "Give it a day to dry and then all get your sparks to come and fit the plug for the pump and then you can fill it with water, ay? Then let it stand for a few more days and then you can put in some water lilies and some fishes, ay? What d'you say? Happy?"

"Perfectly," said Belthar, and handed him his cheque.

"Thank you," said the gnome. "Must say I admire your garden, ay? Storm says you've done it yourself."

Uncomfortable and unused to being complimented by strangers, Belthar said, "Yes well, that's it, then. Thank you."

"You want a lift to town, ay?" offered the gnome. "I know you always walk; often seen you."

"No thank you," said Belthar. "Storm'll be here any minute."

"That's fine then, ay," said the gnome, turning to go. "But it is a nice garden, ay. Well done, that's what I say.

"Well done, ay."

31. Zantedeschia aethiopica

When Storm arrived she found him standing on his verandah, exactly on the centre line of his garden. “The landscaping people liked it,” he said.

“Of course they did, Belthar. You’ve done a great job. Look at it. You must be very proud.”

“I am,” he said. “Everything neat and everything in its place. It’s going to be perfect when it grows.”

“It’s perfect already,” she said, climbing the steps and turning to look.

And it was perfect. The curlicues of lavenders, the precise rows of pansies and alyssums, their tiny flowers just beginning to throw a mist of white and mauve across the dark of the soil.

“Won’t be long and they’ll all be in full bloom. Then it’ll look really fantastic,” she said, taking his arm and pointing to the car. “Shall we?”

“Yes,” he said, enjoying her touch through the fabric of his suit and patting her hand where it rested on the crook of his elbow. “Yes,” he said. “Let’s.”

And he laughed.

-x-

They held the service in the New Church. It had to be the New Church - which was almost a hundred years old - because the Old Church - which was not much older - was far too small for the congregation of such an important man.

Belthar had never seen so many flowers inside the stately stone building. Great cascades of yellow and white chrysanthemums tumbled down on both sides of the altar and swelled up to hide the bier which bore the coffin. And on the coffin a tasteful arrangement of three perfectly positioned white arum lilies held together with a wide white ribbon and resting on a spray of ferns.

Everyone was there. Everyone who knew Edward Passmore, everyone on the municipal council, everyone in the professions, the doctors, the lawyers, the chartered accountants. Everyone who had worked for him, everyone who drank with him at the angling club and at the yacht club and at the tennis club, all his Masonic brothers and all of their wives. Edward Passmore had been a truly important man.

Belthar had all but forgotten the inside of St George’s. The hard, blackened stinkwood pews in the congregation and the choir, the white of the walls, the vaulted darkness of the stinkwood ceiling with its exposed stinkwood rafters, intricately carved into a series of rising gothic points and arches. The altar with its cross in bronze and red enamel and with the rays of the sun worked in gold. The stained glass windows to the glory of God and in loving memory of Harriett, beloved wife; the biblical figures, Jesus with his impossibly long fingers held up in blessing, the Magdalene worshipping at his feet, the red and blue of their robes rich with the afternoon light. And the whole room bright under flood lights, six harsh, unforgiving white lights shining from their perches on the cut stone nibs which supported the rafters.

They were early and they chose their seats and sat down to wait. A printed order of service had been placed in each of the worn, black-clothed hymnals which stood in the recess behind each straight-backed bench. A picture of Edward Passmore, a cross and the dates of his birth and death and inside the words of the hymns they’d be singing. The Lord’s My Shepherd, Amazing Grace, Abide With Me. The organist was playing a dirge, aware of the drama of the day, emphasising some of the passages with Feeling.

The room filled slowly, the quiet of mourners murmuring greetings and seating themselves and staring ahead, shutting themselves off from one another in their awkwardness.

A bustle at the door and they all rose as Lily Passmore glided in under a stylish black hat, with a thin black veil over her eyes, a single white arum in her hand, her dress new and elegant with the simplicity that only money can buy. She was supported by her sister with her sons and her daughters-in-law and her daughter and her son-in-law following attentively, obedient children, a loving family carefully preserved.

She nodded greetings as she recognised people during her procession to the front of the room, stopping once to shake a hand, once to kiss the air near the cheek of a special friend. They

remained standing as the priest entered through a side door, a dried, emaciated old man, dust to dust, ashes to ashes. And they remained standing as he lead them through the first hymn and prayer.

As they sat a second bustle at the front door and the late-comers entered and the priest waited until they were seated before he began the lesson.

With the late-comers came a man of Belthar's age, a jovial, cheerful, overweight fellow who slid into the seat next to Belthar, and nudged him with his elbow and grinned. "Belthar, old boy," he whispered, loudly. "It's been years."

"Hello, James. It has been years: can't say I'm delighted, but I'm sorry you've lost a friend."

James Parker reddened. "Up for a game of cricket are you?" he said. "But wait a minute, you weren't ever really much of a cricketer, were you? Not after that first practice, I think, eh?" and he laughed a little and grinned at Storm. "Ooh, and you've got a lady friend I see. Well, well, Belthar. Who'd have thought?"

"Will you be quiet?" hissed a woman in the next row and Parker deferred to her and settled back into his seat.

The priest finished his reading and announced that Mayor Atherton would deliver the eulogy.

The congregation coughed and shuffled against the discomfort of their seats and settled into silence once more as their municipal leader walked to the pulpit, took his notes from an inside pocket, and, placing his spectacles on his nose and rearranging his golden chain so that everyone could see it, cleared his throat and began to read.

"Mrs Lillian Passmore," and here he paused to bow slightly and dramatically to the widow, "John," and he paused and bowed to the eldest boy, "Arthur," and he bowed to the younger boy "and Betty," a final bow to the daughter. "Ladies and Gentlemen. Friends. What a terribly sad day this is both for you, the family, and for this, our town.

"Edward Passmore was a man of great stature in our community and I had the honour to serve under him on many a committee and even, in the few brief years when he wore this chain of office, on the municipal council. I was even more honoured that he served under me for some years, too, after he stepped down as mayor.

"And Edward Passmore was a man for his family - in fact I remember him telling me that it was to better serve his family that he could no longer serve as mayor. And what a magnificent sacrifice that was, ladies and gentlemen.

"And Edward Passmore was a man for his community - I remember the many times he would come into my office and demand this service for the underprivileged or that service for the poor.

"And Edward Passmore was a man for his sport. He loved his rugby and his cricket and his boxing - but most of all he loved his sailing. And I remember once he told me how he found solace on the water. 'At the helm of my yacht,' he said to me, 'all the cares of the world are too, too far away.'"

The man at Belthar's side nudged him again. "Old Atherton hasn't changed a bit, has he, old boy? Still speaks like he did in the old school debates, don't he?"

"Shush!" hissed the woman as the mayor paused in his eulogy, and, trained always to catch his audience' eye, dropped his head to look over his reading glasses and sweep the room meaningfully before tilting back again and continuing.

"Everyone of us here present was touched in some way by the life of Edward Passmore..."

"Think he's going to go on for ever, Belthar, old boy?" asked Parker.

"Hush!" hissed the woman, turning and glaring at them. A much older woman, her hair white and tied in a plait pinned severely to the back of her head. 'Miss Greene,' thought Belthar. 'That's her. Miss Greene, the science teacher. Must be eighty, at least.'

Parker bumped Belthar again. "Just like the old days, eh? Old Greenie giving us what for."

Storm looked at Belthar. "Knew him at school," he said. "Same class as me."

At last the eulogy ended and the Mayor took his seat and they rose for another hymn. Then they sat again for the sermon - something about service to the community being service to one's self - and then the final hymn.

"Will the congregation please remain in their places until the family have left the church," intoned the priest before stepping down solemnly to shake the widow's hand. "This way," he pointed, following his hand with slow and exaggerated dignity down the main aisle.

Parker turned now to Belthar. He could see he was upset. “Same old Belthar, eh? Can’t take a joke, don’t like a ribbing, eh?”

“Why don’t you leave him alone?” asked Storm.

“Ooh, Belthar’s little girlfriend’s got a voice. Naughty Belthar.”

Belthar looked at him steadily. “Are you still stuck in school after all these years?”

Parker laughed. “Best years of our lives, Belthar,” he said. “Best years of our lives,” and he reached out to poke him under the arm.

“Yes, but you’ve been out of school for a long time,” said Storm.

“Ooh, Belthar’s got a feisty one, hasn’t he? Must be good in the sack, eh, Belthar?”

Strong and powerful from months of hard work, fit and healthy, Belthar caught the man once on the chin. Stunned, his hands wrestling for support, he fell back between the pews, a glazed look of semi-consciousness dulling his round, fat face.

The entire congregation turned to look and a silence came over the church, deeper than any it had ever heard before.

Belthar turned to Storm as the pain of fifty years lifted from his face. “You wanted to know who raped me on my second day at school,” he said. He spoke evenly and without emotion, gently but loudly enough for everyone to hear.

She looked at the man on the floor, holding his jaw and moaning softly. And then she looked back up again at Belthar.

But Belthar shook his head.

“It was Edward Passmore,” he said. “Shorty Passmore.” And he turned and walked out of the church and the crowd moved aside to let him through, shocked, some of the women who had been crying, now crying louder still.

He walked in silence and silence followed him as they all stepped aside to allow him to pass.

32. Platanus acerifolia

Belthar walked out of the false brightness of the church and through the dark of the vestibule and into the glare of late afternoon sun. The day had turned glorious, the sky perfect blue, the air windless and warm. A hearse was waiting at a side door, the antique hearse which they brought out only for the most important funerals, the undertaker and his assistants leaning against its polished coachwork, two horses with feathers strapped to their polls standing with blinkered patience, all of them dressed in black as they should.

He ignored them just as he'd ignored the people waiting inside and, feeling lighter than he ever had before, walked down the stone path under and avenue of plane trees, their white trunks and green leaves fresh against the sky, and through the canopied and moss-covered lychgate and onto the Main Street.

Storm followed him and caught up to him. "They'll get over it," she said.

They both laughed.

"Now everybody knows, Storm. Nothing left to hide."

"I know, Belthar. But I can't believe it. Edward Passmore. The man you worked for all your life."

"I told you, Storm. I just wanted him to like me. But I suppose he never did." He stopped and they looked at each other. "I'm a coward, Storm. I know that. Lived my whole life like that, but I don't need to, anymore. Now that they all know, I suppose there's nothing to be scared of. Maybe they'll forget and things'll be normal again."

"They'll treat you differently, Belthar. Especially at first. They'll treat you the same way they treat someone who's in mourning, because they'll be all uncomfortable and they won't know what to say.

"And Belthar? You aren't a coward. You've lived your life bravely and you were incredibly brave this afternoon."

"I was angry this afternoon, Storm. All those outpourings of love. I know what Edward Passmore did to me, and I've seen the makeup on his wife's face to cover her bruises. They were all being so blimmin' hypocritical there this afternoon." He stopped and looked back up the street. From here he could just make the top of the bell tower on the west side of the church. "None of them really liked him, Storm. Most of them hated him and we were all scared of him. And here they were praising him like he was a Saint."

"You might have been angry, but you were also brave, Belthar, very brave. Look at you," she said, "you even defended my honour." And they laughed again.

"I suppose he'll sue me," said Belthar.

"No, he won't," she said. "And anyway, he had it coming."

They were walking down a side street, past the municipal offices, towards the Lagoon. He stopped and said, "You go back to the car, Storm. I know you need to get it back to Jill and you want to get back to your son. I'm going to walk home."

"How about I drive around and meet you at the end of the footpath? Jill isn't expecting me 'til six."

"No Storm, I'm sure," he said. "I want to go to the water. I need to swim."

"I thought you didn't like swimming?"

"No," he said, "I didn't. But I think I might learn to love it. Right now, I want to be in the water."

"You haven't got your swimming costume with you. You haven't got a towel."

"Don't need them," he said, and he grinned. "I won't be the first old man to swim in the Lagoon."

33. Podocarpus henkelii

When Belthar stepped out of his door on that last morning, the ground was cold beneath his naked feet. It was spring and the air smelled of compost and new leaves and it held an excitement in the perfection of its stillness. Today was River's birthday and the boy was coming to visit; he'd invited him to tea at eleven. "I know you'll want to spend the day with your pals," he'd said, "but I've got something for you and I'd like to see you."

He'd bought him a watch - one of those expensive waterproof things because River loved diving - and he planned to give it to him sitting on the bench under the yellowwood tree which they'd planted together to celebrate something (Storm's fortieth, if he remembered). And today was River's twenty-first and he'd come home from university to celebrate with his mother and his friends.

He thought back to the first time he held the child in the maternity ward and to morning when the gnomes had installed his fountain on the day of Edward Passmore's funeral and, smiling as he leaned on his cane in the weak morning sun, to the formal, ordered garden which this jungle once had been.

In the end he'd never trimmed his lavenders, and he'd never planted a second round of annuals when the pansies and the alyssums had had their day. After that first swim, he'd no longer felt the need to control his world, and he'd allowed the garden to grow as it wanted and he took to walking down to the Lagoon - with a towel over his shoulder and wearing only trunks and a T-shirt - to swim as often as he could. And his garden had thrived on its own. Now it was almost impossible to tell where the forest ended: the fussy strips of lawn had gone and only the gravelled path to the pond and the gate remained. The fountain pump had long ago stopped working and he'd long ago stopped feeding the goldfish, although he knew they were in there still, surviving on the thick green algae which he almost never bothered to remove.

And he'd helped the forest in, too, took down his fences to encourage it. At first it was just the brackens which took over his planting beds, but then he noticed a keurboom shooting above the ferns, and then another and another, and now that the keurbooms had grown and the brackens had died in their shade, he saw that other saplings were sprouting from under the keurs. And recently he'd noticed that the keurs themselves were beginning to die.

"It's as it should be, Belthar," Storm had said. "That's how forests grow, pioneer plants first and then the short-lived, quick-growing trees and then the hardier species, the ones that seem to live forever."

The sharp stones of the path massaged his feet and he listened to their slow crunch, crunch as he walked. He came to the gate and walked to his mail box and opened it and in it found a letter from Peanut. She had been travelling for years and now she was living in London, working there for the season, she said, and then she planned to move on to the Med, where she'd look for a job on the yachts. She wrote that she missed him, her Tata Belthar, her almost-a-granddad, and he imagined her sitting at a able, her head tilted to one side, and how she'd tilt her head again when she licked the envelope to seal it, and again when she dropped it in the post box on the corner of a street as she hurried for the tube.

He thought back to that day in his kitchen with Storm. "Belthar," she had said, "you may be building a garden out there, but the real one's the one you're planting in your heart." And he sat on the bench and closed his eyes.

'Rest here just for a minute,' he thought. 'Just for a minute.'

He was tired and he let his chin fall forward onto his chest and as he began to feel himself gently drifting away he thought 'It's true. Storm and Jill and Peanut and River.

'My family.

'My garden.'

Knysna. January 2009