

UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL

Ice core: an original collection of stories,
plus a brief critical essay on the writing process

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Declaration

I, Melita Vurden (207501608) declare that

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Abstract

This thesis comprises an original collection of short stories entitled *Ice Core*, plus a brief self-reflexive essay on the challenges, emphases and informing contexts which influenced the writing process. The stories in *Ice Core* were envisioned and subsequently arranged as a short story cycle. Because of my interest in the shifting mobilities of geography, history and identity which inform the collection, I deliberately wished to avoid a linear narrative progression, hoping instead to capitalise on the ability of the cycle structure to accrue flexible resonance, to accommodate shifts of foci and voice even while simultaneously consolidating to form a ‘core’ connected to regional place and community. The stories are set in the North Beach area of Durban, so it is no coincidence that water as a motif repeatedly permeates the collection. This is apt for my interest in this urban coastal space, and serves to complement the mobile nature of the short story when positioned within a cycle. In the subsidiary component of the thesis, namely, the brief critical essay, I discuss the short story form as a genre, and conceptual paradigms of the short story cycle, referring to work by critics such as Forrest Ingram (1971) and Sue Marais (1992). The essay goes on to discuss regionalism as a major characteristic establishing realism in a cycle, with reference especially to character identification and distinctive dialogue. I suggest that these elements can animate ‘place’, prompting setting to emerge as the central character of the collection. I also refer to Michel de Certeau’s piece, “Walking in the City” (1998), since *Ice Core* captures fragments of Durban from a street-level point of view which, according, to de Certeau, is important in understanding the ways in which a city is made meaningful through incessant transformations. The mobility of my stories, then, can be seen to emulate something of the associated mobility of the local urban area on which the stories focus. Through this essay I aim to show the short story genre as not merely the naïve fragmented expression of personal experience or ‘inspired’ imagination but one notable for disciplined and inventive practices.

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ICE CORE

An original collection of stories

By

Melita Vurden

For Goolam Mohamed Hussain (Uncle G)

26.08.1951-03.07.2010

Rinkrat Races

If you drive along Brickhill Road toward the Durban beachfront, just as you pass the only drive-in I've ever known, which is now anyway an empty nothing space for the circus and sometimes parking for holiday buses, take a look across the road. You might notice a big blue and white building. (Stupid, how I almost said 'huge'.) That's the Durban Ice Rink, the name bold on the front, just above some blue wooden doors that are permanently locked. You have to look closer, see, at the little red and white sign: 'Entrance round the corner'. Which means, on Somtseu Road.

It's quite a place, the rink, with its arched roof and two ramps leading to a ticket box below street level, known to us locals as the Cashbox. You might expect to find a fancy square of ice inside, smooth and swish and spacious. And while I don't want to disappoint you, the truth is a lot smaller. The rink is less than half the size of the entire building. Though skating's not why I go there. I don't really skate. Well I can, but I hardly ever do. The rink is more like my second home slash workplace slash pitstop slash gossip central. And the Cashbox is the head-office.

The Cashbox. A little ice cube just big enough for the float box, the phone, the safe on the floor and my chair. There're also bullet holes in the front glass, so at least I can hear the customers.

"Right then, Kim, I'll be off." That was Alice, opening the door. But once she leaned out the Cashbox, she saw what was waiting along the roadside.

The locals, a bunch of teenagers who chilled at the rink every day. And as stern and short as she was, Alice marched around the Cashbox, pulled wide the glass front door and yelled:

"Oi! You lot! Get on home; this isn't a playground! Bladdy Rinkrats!"

The Rinkrats. We couldn't have picked out a better name for ourselves even if you'd promised us a lifetime's supply of Paddle Pops. I was in the Cashbox right then, but still one of them. The rest of the Rinkrat crew checked Alice over and sauntered off. But she had to know they wouldn't go far.

“Hello Kimmy!” screamed Uncle G as he walked down the stairs of the passage inside the rink toward the Cashbox. His voice seemed to echo and reach the corner before he did. Just then Alice slammed the door.

“I don’t wan’em hangin’ around `er Goolim. Buggers. I’ll see you tomorrow, `ey. I’m really off this time; can’t get stuck in that five o’ clock traffic again.”

Goolam Hussain was the night manager of the rink and on the weekend he practically owned it. A tall brown man with short greyish hair, and a rounded tummy that made him seem huggable. About sixty, he probably was, but with the mischief he got up to you could think he was sixteen. I admired him. Especially that he could always handle his scandals.

“You know those bastards don’t listen. They know she won’t leave if she sees them hanging around.”

I guess the way they saw it she eventually had to leave. So making their presence known would only annoy her more. But Alice wasn’t all that bad, only prickly. There was the posh air she had, some strict control surrounding the ex-principal of some genuine English school. In England. It meant people didn’t take easily to her.

I was about to ask G about his day, but there was a knock on the front glass of the Cashbox. Kenny and Reagan. I pressed the buzzer and the boys bounced in.

“Yoh G! That lady, she’s a heavy mums; she must be careful...shouting at me like that.”

I giggled. A warning like that coming from Kenny, the skinny Indian boy who spoke with a white accent. He was our laaitie, not much taller than the door handle. He wore black jeans and a black Chicago jacket every day. The buff jacket was meant to disguise his small build.

Kenny and Reagan were like David and Goliath. Reags was almost as tall as the door itself, with hands complementing his size ten Vans. He was coloured in every sense of the word. Trouble and alcohol followed him like girls; despite the fact that he wore his blue and white pinstripe Samson jumpsuit almost every-damn-day, the ladies went ga-ga over him.

Just then David, Lauren and Kaye walked in. The standard dress code amongst the Rinkrats was hoodies and jeans, myself included. And David, with his black DC sneakers, could not have looked any more like a North Beach skater boy than he already did. But here's a thing: I heard once that only two percent of all the people in the world have freckled skin and red hair. Well, David and Kaye would be part of this minority, though I'm not sure about the category of 'the world,' cause if you asked them, they'd both tell you the same thing: they don't come from any world, people, they come from the ice rink.

"What's for supper G?" Kaye asked.

"I don't know. What d'we feel like tonight?"

"How's a durry murry?" asked David as he smiled nicely at G, soeking a cigarette as always.

"It's a big week this week, hey G," said Kenny.

"Big? Big City Life!" shouted G, as he took the chair from the Cashbox and sat outside. That way he could welcome people as they walked down the ramps from either end. Ou G, always parking dom with a smile on his face. But don't be fooled, cause if he wasn't acting out a plan in motion, he most definitely had something up his sleeve. And trust me, he knew everything about anything. Sitting outside was the closest he could get to the street while still doing his job. And this week was an important one; a man needed to pay close attention to the word on the street, gathering all the tips he could.

Because coming up was the first Saturday of July, which meant the biggest horseracing event in Africa, the Vodacom Durban July. From the fashion shows to the three million rand jackpot, from the grandstand to the Miller tent, from the rich investors to the middle-class addicted gamblers, Greyville racecourse was then the place to be. Even for those who just wanted an excuse for some little excitement, considering Durban isn't exactly the entertainment hotspot of the universe. Okay, so we got the highest water slide in the southern hemisphere and a mini Las Vegas with its own private beach. But you've got to admit, the fascination for bright lights and a quick slide doesn't last too long. Maybe six seconds, for a local.

So we all sat outside and tuned our ears to every possibility, looking for a scoop. It was pretty quiet. G nipped in again; used the Cashbox phone to call Thuli in the milk bar inside and told

her to bring us a large portion of hot-chips with all the sauces, plus a few rolls. That would be supper.

“Looks like we getting away early today,” said G as he stared at the empty ramp. “It’s no use running up the electricity and bringing in no moola. Where’s all our regular punters?”

When Thuli brought the food, we set it on the wall along the bottom of the ramp and tucked in chip by saucy chip. I enjoyed eating slowly, but the guys were moving ten to one. So that’s when I knew a catch-up was in order, and suddenly the whole feminine thing took a back seat and I was in there with the best of them. As I licked my last finger clean, I just couldn’t seem to shake the feeling that I was being watched.

“Hello Goolam,” said Adrian holding on to the steel bars of the fence above and staring hungrily for possible left-overs.

Adrian. The local street kid. Also a car guard on days that suited him. A boy, a man, a guy probably in his late teens. African by the looks of it. He wore a white vest and a pair of tattered jeans. Every day. No neon vest. He didn’t buy in to the whole dedicated car guard profession, and if he wasn’t guarding the cars at the rink he was gallivanting the beach front or trying to fit in with the youngsters who hung around. So, not a Rinkrat, but near enough a wannabe.

A few adults ambled down the right ramp at about seven that evening. They bought their tickets from me through the Cashbox window, and went inside to skate-hire. Business was slow. They’d have the entire rink to themselves. And we were free to sit outside enjoying tobacco for dessert.

Adrian chipped in from the road above. “Ay Goolam, Delpech is riding Zirconium on Saturday, but Mike Bass got so many horses this year. He’s catching up with De Kock.”

I used to speak to Adrian every now and again. I’d learned that he’d lived all over Durban, mostly in Wentworth, which explained his coloured accent. When I’d asked about his mother or his father he’d never answered; just repeated my question and smiled at the floor. If he was cagey about himself, he did however know everything about everyone, and if he always stood

just outside of conversations, he often butted in, telling people a little more about the person they were talking about before he walked away.

That day, when he mentioned the horses, everybody paused. However many times he did this, Adrian always had the power of surprise.

“You been talking to the horses again?” asked Kenny.

“Ja. You come up here and I’ll show you horse power,” said Adrian, winking at Kenny. He’d spent a lot of time at the racecourse, Adrian had. Whether he worked there or just hung around unnoticed was something we’d never know. But he certainly knew a lot about racing. Trainers, owners, race dates, jockeys. He knew so much about the horses that he kinda looked like one when he smiled, with those dark gums and serious front teeth that jutted forward. Not quite horsey though. Now the teeth of a horse are more or less in line as far as I know, but in Adrian’s case, his pearly non-whites popped out from all angles and the strangest corners, though even with this odd kit, he was never shy of smiling. He had a grin wide as a stable, and he opened his mouth like he was starring for Colgate.

“Big City Life!” yelled G. That was his favourite to win.

“Ahh Goolam!” nodded Adrian, smiling and smiling.

“Biiig City Life!” yelled G again, laughing.

“It’s gonna win Goolie, I’m telling you! Cheyne is a winner this year. We gonna ride to victory!”

“Big City Life!”

On G’s final whoop, Adrian flipped. Maybe it was the name of that horse did something to him, shouted over and over. Adrian’s eyes opened wider, his front teeth jutted out more and he built up a momentum which kick-started a hyperactive run back and forth along the steel fence, mad man in mad gallop. From the entrance of the left ramp to the entrance of the right ramp, he seemed to hit that turf back and forth getting more and more excited as if he were running the July right then and there.

“The lift doesn’t go all the way to the top with that one,” said G shaking his head as Adrian pelted out of sight.

I shrugged. “But d’you think he’s right, G? You reckon Big City Life’s the one this year?”

We all wondered.

“Get real!” said David, “That one’d be a rich man if he really knew which horse to back every time.”

G just smiled, lost in his own world.

We closed the rink early that night. Switched the lights off and locked the doors as soon as the few skaters had left. The next few evenings were almost no different. Times weren’t good. Skating wasn’t either. Who knew what would happen next, or where it would end.

Friday night I was sitting outside the front entrance between sessions. With Adam this time. He was one of the few Rinkrats who had a real job. A panel beater always in blue overalls, a blue-eyed boy who’d been coming to the rink since he was a child. He always stopped by to spend some time with his replacement father, Uncle G, before heading back to the North Beach flat he shared with his mother.

Just then Adrian appeared, walking slowly down the ramp, checking all paranoid to see who was around. It reminded me of long ago, playing cops and robbers.

“What you up to?” I asked.

“Where’s Goolam and his whip?”

Adrian knew he wasn’t allowed near the entrance. Uncle G used a short black whip to scare the shit out of him if he became uncontrollable, though sometimes he held off if Adrian was being entertaining. Uncle G had to think of the public, see, because these days the public don’t take lightly to street kids. The further they are from a place of business, the better. You can’t afford to compromise your kerb appeal.

“Howsit Adam?” said Adrian, putting out his hand to shake Adam’s.

“Good,” said Adam curtly, as he walked away toward the entrance of the rink.

Adrian then shifted his hand and his attention in my direction. But sorry, I didn’t think so! I stared at it for a moment, the hand, thoughts scrambling my mind. Thinking of the day Adrian told me he couldn’t afford a five rand shelter in town so he slept on the street right

there outside the rink. How he also didn't fail to mention that he didn't brush his teeth that morning, and had to get down with his other business in the gutter. No wonder I worried where his hands had been. Just looking at them made me feel shaken up. I knew his little game. What he always tried. He knew how he made us feel when he tried to shake our hands. I'd seen many other people too, watched them shrug him off as they jumped out their cars. Yet he still always offered a hand shake, as if he thought it was the right thing to do. The proper way for a man to behave.

Adam was suddenly back, came running out the front door of the rink with Uncle G's big black whip in his hand. He gave a few practice cracks in the air and Adrian jumped out of his skin ran off up the ramp into the street, screaming, "Big City Life!"

The Saturday morning of the big race, the sun shone brightly on the city. I got to the rink about a quarter to ten, and could almost hear the beach calling me from behind the buildings. It hardly mattered whether I was there or not, because today I knew everyone was headed to the racecourse, dressed in their best. Forget the ice rink. By the evening, people would have pissed their cash away, and they'd be stumbling out to all the after parties.

As I got to the glass entrance doors, G opened up, bright and breezy. He was all smart. Black formal pants and shoes, a snappy pink shirt. A black stetson and some snazzy black shades. Glay-mode at its best.

I felt a bit down. I made my way inside the old Cashbox cubby hole and pulled open the window blind. Same old view as ever as the day began. The public rolled in slowly. It was only the groups of scheduled birthday parties that kept us busy, running around for change, trying to get the party tables set up, moving the queue inside and onto the ice asap. All so we could get down to the real agenda of the day....

"Here's the race card Kimmy, have a look. Choose about seven horses in each race," said G as he handed me a pocket-sized blue book.

"How should I choose, G? By name or what? And why seven?"

"Don't think so much. Just choose seven from each race. You'll see how it works. Look at the names or the numbers, which ever suits you and boom, you done!"

So I did as he said and G gave Adam the bets to take at the tote.

“Take them all as a quartet boxed; they should be a little less than ten rand each.”

“No place bets or wins, G?” asked Adam.

“Come on now, Adam, you know me. I rather win one percent of the pool for my ten rand, than take six rand place bets.”

And Adam pedalled off to take the bets. He returned a while into the second skating session, sweating, his t-shirt stuck to his back. A sticky white boy with a tomato face. Which reminded me why I chose to work at the ice rink for the summer holidays.

“I saw Adrian, G. I screamed ‘Big City Life!’ and he looked ready to lose it. He was headed to the racecourse, I think. Could that horse stand a chance?”

“Well, Greg Cheyne has never won the July. But who knows.”

The races were forty-five minutes apart. After each race, G phoned the betting hotline as we all sat squeezed in the Cashbox with the phone on speaker. G would write down the numbers of the winning horses and I would check the bets. If any of the seven horses we’d taken in each race ran in the first four, then we’d be smiling. But the main race at half past four was the big one, that’s what we were waiting for. For that, I connected my headset to my cell and we listened live on the radio.

“And they’re off! Pulling in close together, Our Giant heading the lot. Forest Path right behind him. And they approach the bend. Katmandu struggling behind. And they spread out. River Jetez running from the inside. Likeithot next to him. It’s Thandolwami gaining speed. And it’s River Jetez pushing forward. There comes Big City Life from the outside! It’s Big City Life passing Likeithot. It’s Thandolwami, River Jetez and Big City Life to the finish. Likeithot just behind. It’s Thandolwami and Big City Life...Big City Life pushing fast! It’s Big City Life... and they’re almost at the finish...Big City Life! Big City Liiife! Yes! It’s Big City Life running from the outside and winning by a leg!”

I just stood there stunned. Shit! Adrian was right after all! G and I went into the Cashbox to call for the results. It was Big City Life, followed by Thandolwami, River Jetez and number twenty coming in fourth. We had all in our quartet except for Thandolwami. Who knew Raymond Danielson could come so close to winning.

“Oh well, you win some you lose some,” said G. “We still got five races to go.”

“But G, the pool was three million! And we’ve been missing by just one leg the entire day. We should have just listened to Adrian. I wonder if he even took a bet. Dumbass!”

The last stragglers from the two-thirty session left. The next session looked set to be empty. Same as us. So G and I closed the front door and sat inside the Cashbox with the front blind down, quickly listening to the results of the eleventh race before we opened the rink.

G wrote down the winning horses while I got the float ready.

“Right. Check it there Kimmy. It’s 2, 14, 5 and 8.”

“2, 5, 8 and... 14. Wait! What’s it again?”

“2, 14, 5 and 8,” said G.

I looked things over carefully....G! That’s all four!”

What a thrill. The Cashbox was way too small for such big excitement; G dialled the betting hotline to find out the pool. “It’s probably about thirty thousand,” he said, the phone to his ear. Then he grinned, his eyes bold, his smile huge. He stuck out his right hand for a high-five. “Eighty thousand!”

“What! So how much did we win?”

“That’s about eight hundred rand in our pockets!” he danced, shuffling all the tickets together. “Kimmie girl, you stick around and handle the session; I’m off to the tote quick, before it closes.”

He was back in half an hour. He handed me four hundred in cash.

“We did well today, hey, Kim,” he said as we cashed up the last, slow session that night.

By the time I got home, I didn’t even have the energy to explain to my parents. Well, that and they didn’t need to know I had extra funds. How could I hustle them if they knew I could afford not to?

I went straight to bed. There was work the next day. Sunday, but I had to be at the rink early because of all the skating clubs that practised then.

When I woke, I should have felt happy about the money, but the thought of another day. Work. Again. It was some walk, and I set out, determined. Same old. I saw the same old sun behind the same old buildings. The same young street kids already at it, begging at the robots. I wasn't in the mood. At least they didn't have to travel to work, I thought. They just wake up right there, ready to roll.

Around eight I reached the rink, the left ramp entrance leading all the way downhill, into the dive. The sun was high. Across the road, with the sun glaring in my eyes, I saw someone smartly dressed, about Adrian's height and complexion. He'd just strolled out of the Oceanic Hotel, opposite the rink. He and some girl. They were about to jump into a Mozzie cab, and were sliding open the back door. Just before he got in, the man glanced over the roof of the cab, across the street, at me. He smiled. I shook my head and blinked, straining to get a proper look. Shit, was I really that tired? But by then the cab had driven off and there was nothing for it but to put my head down and head to the rink, my mind full of the most unlikely thoughts.

Telephone Tjoons

Plenty of times I sat in that Cashbox bored out of my mind. Everyone else was on the beach, or getting high in the park. At work maybe, who knows, plotting to take over the world. Anyways I looked, it was a world much bigger than mine, that's for sure, trapped in the stuffy little Cashbox. Once I was in, I could hardly get out; Alice didn't like me leaving the place unattended so I was pretty much snowed in. She'd even come down from her high-up office to close the top half of the door if I left it open. Had to make sure the help didn't escape. The place was wall-to-wall white. White to my left. White to my right. And with a sort of paint drip effect, tears frozen in silence. Ice floes tall and solid and looming, and poor me caught in the middle, slowly freezing to death. There were only lists pinned up on these glaciers: things I knew by heart like session times and prices and telephone numbers. People I didn't know but couldn't call even if I wanted to, as my hot line was direct to the Ice Queen Alice in her igloo upstairs.

The rink was always cold. The black rubber floors damp. I had to sit for hours to make my money. That was the job, so that's what I did. Sat and froze. I always wished Uncle G would turn up sooner rather than later, then I wouldn't struggle so hard to stay awake. His laughing and joking, the sense of freedom. G was a great chill chaser.

Sometimes a walk to the Ladies down the passage did the trick, helped get the blood flowing, made me remember I was still alive, and that I had legs and I knew how to use them.

Although usually I stayed put, because somehow the phone always chose to ring just as I needed to go. Nothing worse than having to hold it. Nothing.

"Durban Ice Rink, good day." (Listen, this girl can do bright and breezy, charm itself, despite everything.)

"Hi. Durban Ice Rink?"

"Yes."

I mean, *hello*. Durban. Ice. Rink. So who else it's gonna be? A Chinese take-out? 'Solly, we flesh out chow mein aleddy so you tek won to' issted?'

Man, what I wouldn't give for some of that right about now. There's a great place just up the road; Sezchuan. Sechwahn. Szechuan. Whatever it is, actually. Anyway: nice people and good food. I eat that stuff often enough, so why I'm always doing that other thing ... simple sitting ducks, maybe.

"You open?"

No, we're closed and this phone call is just an exciting personal fantasy.

Press 1 for Awful Alice.

Press 2 for Sexy Sam.

Don't Press 3 for me cause I'm not open.

I waited a while. Decided I'd better reply.

"Yes."

"What time's your sessions?"

"Ten till twelve, twelve-fifteen till two-fifteen, two-thirty till four-thirty, five till seven, and seven-thirty till ten-thirty." I had it down pat.

"Sjoe. And how much are tickets?"

"Twenty-five rand. But the last session's thirty."

Tickets. Pieces of blue paper. Torn off. Ripped. A whole check book full of them. Each one numbered. Numbers are important in business. Numbers are important when filling out the Daily Sales Report. Small hand writing is too. And neat. Neatness and accuracy above all. Ask Alice.

"That includes the skates?"

Yes. No. Yes no yes no yes. Duh? Try skate in your slops, mister. Skate on your ass for all I care. Bring your own skates. Dig around in the garage for your mother's old pair, the ones

she gave to your sister probably. But you'd look sweet in white, I bet. That tight lacing. Or you know what! I dare you to go down to your local sports store and ask them why there aren't any skates for sale right there between the bikes and rollerblades. Maybe one day though. Maybe one day when it snows in Durban figure skating and ice hockey will take the city by storm. *Yes!* People need to get out more. There's a whole world, you know. And never mind in one country.

"*Yes.*"

I wish this would end. If he wants to be on ice so bad then why doesn't he go down to a pawn shop and buy some skates. There's still some hanging on down Point Road. Every beat up style of boots and blades keeping each other company up there on hooks. Hanging there between some dusty old instruments, boogie boards, rusty tools and chipboard bedroom suites. The world at your feet.

"Oh, okay. So uh, what's the times again?"

In a perfect world I'd put the caller through to a voice recording, get him off my hands. Then again, in a perfect world we Rinkrats would actually own the rink, which was so far from happening that clearly nothing was ever going to be perfect. Most days I worried the Cashbox was it for me, you know, good as things were ever going to get. The ice rink wet and melting and falling apart but somehow still standing like it's here forever. And me too. Kimmie shivering in the Cashbox in her frozen skin, trapped on the line with idiots the whole day. Come on, change it up people!

I reeled off the sessions one two three super speedy, fast and furious, confident, unstoppable, refusing limits. And then...nothing.

Afterwards, I loved the silence, vast and empty, enough to lose yourself completely for one short moment. But eventually the caller would come to.

"And kids? Same price for them?"

Kids. Always the kids. But they grow up, don't they, and have to deal with real life. So spare me, please. Face the harsh facts: no kiddies' portions. Same size ice. Same size price. And if you're not careful, those blades will cut your foot down to size, whether it's big or small. Guaranteed.

"The prices are standard, sir. Adults or children. You pay the same."

"And will you be open this weekend?"

No, never! Open? Us? The Ice Rink? On a weekend? Shit, we've been open every weekend for the past I don't know how many years. Yoh! As if this isn't one of the most popular tourist destinations in all the local holiday brochures. As if I've just been watching TV at home for the past few weeks, getting fat and getting paid for it.

"Yes."

"Right. Sorry, and your name is?"

"Kim." (Kardashian. Cattrall. Basinger. I scrolled wishfully through the options.)

"Hey that's cute! You sound cute."

Ja, like the stray cats that hang around here with their mean yellow eyes. Cute if you're into that emo sort of thing. I'm done with cute. Dear Mum who dressed her little darling real pretty. Dear Dad who read his sweet daughter bedtime stories every night. The whole perfect family portrait.

"Okay then. Thank you so much."

"Not a problem."

"Okay. Bye, Kim. Thanks again."

Silence.

And that's when I'd have a little fun. I'd stay quiet, saying nothing at all, hardly breathing while the ice smoke swirled across the black rubber mats, the caller waiting for the silence to speak.

Bye Bye.

Cheers.

Have a good day now!

We appreciate your call
and look forward to
doing business with you.

Something.

Anything to signal the end of the endless conversation I keep having to endure.

Four seconds and the caller would hesitate: "H h hello?"

No answer.

Eight seconds and the caller would cough, or clear his throat. Hers.

Only a blank, mysterious nothing. Space as still as the mist ice creates in the earliest hours of the morning. Empty as the ice rink before the skaters and their blades.

Then the phone would go dead, and with a friendly smile, I'd do the same. Hang up. Childish, I know. I should act my age. It's not like I finished school yesterday. You'd think a young adult would be more mature. I know.

But stuck like this, trapped in a chilly little ice cube the whole day, alone and bored and adrift, a girl does what she has to, right.

This crappy job's no joke, believe me, so I take my entertainment anyway I can.

Some Kind of Skate

Shaved head, average height, tanned skin. Half way between a man and a boy; some guy on a sunny day who decided to roll on over and swop his skateboard for blades. Give ice skating a go, at least for an afternoon.

Hot stuff. But I kept my mind on the money, the exchange of purple, red and green; the plink of coins dropping in the red metal box. Still, I knew this one was unusual.

He asked for a ticket, and his posh British accent pierced a new bullet hole in the Cashbox window. My curiosity the target. I stared into his eyes (blue) and handed over a ticket (blue too). *Maybe this was what Uncle G meant by a match made in Heaven.*

The tattooed hand was waiting politely while my mind floated. Zooming in to his blue eyes I could see those Mediterranean waters rippling all around us like in the new Dolce & Gabbana advert, another perfume that promised seduction. He was it. What David Gandy would've been if he opted for a more local lifestyle. I could almost smell Light Blue through the Cashbox glass.

Over on the beach side, the sun intensified every colour, kicking the graffiti into life. The skate park ramps and bowl, the half-pipe and flat land, everything was an urban scrawl. Spray painted pupils dilated as if the ink had been spiked. Letters smoked and ballooned in every style, arrowing someone's tag. Total heaven. It was one of those days. A surfer would want to get out there and catch the perfect wave, a skater push harder and olly around the park. But not my guy, who chose blades over wheels on this perfect day, trading Adidas superstars for chunky plastic boots, venturing bravely below zero. No soaking up the warm Durban sun for him. Though maybe that's what drove him into my arms (so to speak). The humidity here can be very persuasive, sticky enough to make people chill in their own chest freezers. But hey, that's why we have the ice rink! And our doors are always open - especially if you've got that Gandy Swag. I had my eyes on this guy; he just didn't know it yet.

After the last person stepped inside I opened the top half of the Cashbox door. There. Feet in black socks, a little hole around his baby toe. So cute! Again I found myself staring. Those blue eyes. So deep there had to be something buried in there. And me? I was very willing to dig.

Question: Could I watch his board during the session.

Correct answer: “And Kim, you are *not* allowed to keep anyone’s things while they skate. I don’t want trouble.” I remembered Alice’s warning, back when I was still a novice Rinkrat.

My answer: “No problem! She can stay close to me, here in the ice cube.” I managed to raise a smile with that. Things were warming up nicely.

For two hours I kept that baby company. A long, lean lovely tipped elegantly against the white wall. It was interesting, this board. I made intelligent conversation. No mean girl stares. I kept it pleasant between the two of us, making nice.

She’d definitely been places, this one. Skated ramps, ground them down. Nose grinds, pressure flips, bitch slaps. Definitely. For sure Blue Eyes was a ripper. The wheels still spun pretty well, but they were scratched up bad; Orange, yellow, maybe even pink, it was hard to tell the original colour. The front of the deck was cracked, the black top peeled away. I turned it over, again, and touched the stickers scrawled across. His world.

He’d be some serious performer, I could tell. Most guys these days are. And Durban boasts some of the best performers around. Durban? This place is Performance City.

But best you learn early, girl: don’t be fooled by the flattering lingo; don’t be attracted by the polished bling, and never (i.e. ever) let him know that he drives the sexiest car this side of the Indian Ocean. Just don’t. Trust me.

This city where I grew up, the city where the cartoons taught us to believe in heroes. Red, yellow and blue, just like the sticker near the back truck of Blue Eyes’ sleek board. Superman. Super heroes.

And these days, guys are as brave as ever I tell you. I’ve seen them move out their parents’ place as teenagers, and pledge life-long-love to the first girl they kiss. Forever and all that. Sickness and health. But give it a year, I swear. After a year of living together, and usually one baby later, it’s time to change up the act. Move out, experiment. After all, the show must go on. Which isn’t so entertaining for her, you know. Imagine it. An accidental wife at nineteen, like Raylene. Or you’re locked in this tiny love cage with a guy like Tyrelle calling you every five minutes you’re not with him just because of some insecurity skating circles around his head.

Not the kind of circles my Gandy-man skater was probably making at sub-zero inside, a world of blue and white, of blades and straight lines. Would he manage a twirl or a jump, I wondered, or were his feet left footed?

I wanted to believe he had no limits, my blue-eyed boy. He had no limits, I could tell! The stickers said it all: New York, Barcelona, Shenzhen, exotic horizons interrupted by scratches and paint which proved all the places he'd been. I touched the underside of his board - ok, almost damn *stroked* it, I admit. Wondered what he was up to inside, jammed in the crowded session. I so badly wanted to see him in action, but the Cashbox held me fast. Plus his board, don't forget. I couldn't go back on my word.

It got so busy later I did have to forget the skateboard. So much stuff to do. Began checking my float. Concentrated on the crumpled notes and the dirty coins. The usual telephone tjoons clutched between my ear and shoulder as people squeezed out the front doors between the next session crowd already lining up outside.

By the end of it my job was done; everything was neatly stacked next to the daily sales report and I could finally relax. I decided to head for Spar. Nothing beat a Paddle Pop ice-cream in this heat. The best way in the world to spend R2.50.

But as I grabbed my bag, the board hit the floor. "Shit!" He'd forgotten.

I kept the skateboard in the Cashbox for a few days, convinced he'd be back, though I hid it, and didn't tell anyone. About the board, or the guy. About Blue Eyes who wasn't.

I tried to stay hopeful, but it felt like when you're watching TV and trying to catch the new ad you've heard someone talk about. You're either scared to change the channel in case you miss it, or you can't stop surfing between all 119 of them, just to be sure.

Pity. I'd really hoped to catch a whiff of that subtle D&G scent again. Cos I'd be ready this time. I mean, skaters might travel light, but even they needed the essentials.

That Night

Weird how the freezer only makes that noise at night, like something comes alive. I used to pretend it was the little people, tinier cousins of the oompa loompas. I imagined them busy in there with little ice picks and thermometers, managing the chill factor.

Though of course it was Ma who had to chip out the ice when the oompas went on leave, wherever it was they went. Surely somewhere tropical. Defrosting was always Ma's job, her hands all red like that, bowls of boiling water set inside the ice box, layers of newspaper for the weepy spills. Breadknife at the ready to hack off those thick, resistant chunks. *Shhhit*. What a mess. You wouldn't catch me doing that. The Cashbox was bad enough, and when I wasn't trapped in there, my job was being cool.

It was morning, but not yet light, the sea breeze still warm from the night before. We'd only ended up at Suncoast because Jess and I needed the toilet and those were the cleanest we could think of. We pulled up to the drop-off zone and ran in, racing past a zombie gambler wobbling his way out, and the dark blue uniform of a slow sweeper trying hopelessly to shepherd dust, paper and popcorn kernels. Relieved, we exited just as the others entered the entertainment world, all looking a little worse for wear after the night we'd had. We wore our go-with-the-flow outfits. Casual like. The guys we'd met, they were in Raybans and BVDs, except this guy Randy in a blue and red Detroit vest, and some Mikey person in a powder blue soccer shirt. Us girls were cute as usual in white vests and checked shorts. Carla in her fave black and pink pumps.

Who could have known that the concert would spiral into something bigger than the last Sunday session at the rink? Or that a bottle of Hennessy would spark the desire for more things nice, causing the moon to shine so brightly on '80's', the club too empty to charge an entrance fee but still keeping the faith with their buy one get one free promo. All those 500ml bottles. All that sweaty, liquid gold. We soon lost interest in the game on the big screen and found focus in the 3.2megapixel window of a Sony Ericsson. Posing, posing, like we were promoters and getting paid. And now here we were at our local Las Vegas, hungry.

Three hours earlier:

The guys are whispering. I've never met them before so I figure they're soft spoken or suffer from some collective speech impediment, or maybe there's some secret headed in my direction. Spot on, Kevo calls me aside and makes a proposal I can't refuse. Well, whether

it's the thrill of the proposal or the promise in his green eyes, I'm still not certain. Either way...

A couple of pavements, a few turns, we enter a busy street. People hanging around outside a club. Looks Jamaican.

First buy: zol.

I drive slow. Sense some action at the back. Voices. The rear window rolls down.

"Come with the Swazi my man."

The window rolls up. I drive away faster. What are we getting ourselves into here?

I still didn't know where I was going, I turned where they told me to. I wanted to turn back.

Carla and Jess were busy exchanging numbers with the boys in the backseat.

Second buy: ekies.

Randy tells me to switch off the car lights as we approach - things are going down. Mikey sits comfortable in the front seat, sippin' on a drink he's hustled out of '80's', pulling on a Winston. The rest are squashed in the back.

I drive slow. It's dark. We're all looking out for a guy we don't know. Then Randy's phone rings and he shows me to pull over. The back window rolls down. I check the rear view mirror. Have to make sure I'm not being followed.

"Where's this ou?"

"How are we suppose to know who he is ha?"

"Just relax, we'll know him when we see him".

"How bra? How!"

"I have a not-so-good feeling about all this," Carla mumbled to Jess as she held her hand. I kept looking around. For what, I don't know. Police? This Guy? Left view mirror, right view mirror, rear view, left again. Ok. My heart started to pound... just a bit.

"I think we should go now..." said Jess.

And right there out of the washed down peach building in front us came a dark round black figure. Busy on his phone. Head down.

"There's the ou," said Randy.

But how did he know. What kind of intuition are these boys drinking?

Randy jumped out. We watched him. Was this what a stake-out felt like? He gave the dark man a heads up. Street code for 'whatkind'. They shook hands then walked towards the car. WTF! Why was he bringing this guy here? They both squashed in the back. Carla hopped on Jess. The shadow man stared at her thighs.

"Whatkind my man," said Kevo. "Let's see what you got."

And he showed them a few tiny pills wrapped in a cream soda green tissue.

"Aweh! Top stuff. How much for six?" asked Randy.

"One twenty."

"Don't fuck around. I'm from South Beach my man. How much?"

"That's it, laaitie."

"Who the fuck you calling laaitie!"

And with that Randy punched him in the face so hard his head cracked the window. Veins of glass spread in an instant. Have you ever seen someone go from zero to red-eyed vein popping one hundred percent angry? Like *that*? His rage grew in the back seat. Punching. Swearing. Choking. Jess and Carla on top of one another. Screaming. Kevo trying to hold Randy, but all he held was the force of an elbow in his face. Swearing. Choking. Punching.

"Who's yar laaitie ha!" screamed Randy.

"Drive bra! Drive!" Mikey pushed me.

I panicked. I turned the car on. I was in a high speed chase, except what was I chasing? I didn't want to chase. I want to run!

"Turn down there," yelled Mikey.

Really? You're gonna navigate at a time like this?

Carla and Jess were screaming louder now. I glanced over my shoulder and caught a glimpse of glass veins turned red.

"Right! Stop! Stop here!" Mikey instructed. "Throw him out! Throw him out!"

Kevo leaned over and yanked the door open. Carla and Jess were bawling their eyes out. Randy, breathing heavy, pushed the dark man out the car and slammed the door.

"Fuck this ou, I'm not his laaitie!" He sat there, still enraged. Staring ahead.

"What the fuck is wrong with you bra!" Mikey shouted, "You wanna get us in shit?"

"Haai no stories bru, he won't remember fuckol. I smashed him."

"No bru, there's ladies in the car. You wrong!"

Silence.

"Ay, sorry everyone, but no one calls me a laaitie. No one. You still got the stash Kevo?"

“Ay fuck you and your cream sodas. Take them! Pop them yourself!” Kevo holding the left side of his face.

South Beach was even more of a labyrinth at night. Every street led to the next and the main streets had become one-way or were under construction, plus Mikey could only give blurred directions so I drove down this one and up that one, like through every side road there was. We even took the pedestrian route, ignoring the signs.

Two turns later, a road block.

“Oh fuck!”

Suddenly everyone sat up straight. Mikey stashed his bottle. I turned down the music.

Another shadow to deal with.

But of course the officer pulled us over. A man wearing that particular dark blue isn't going to bypass the opportunity to tell a female driver to stop. I stopped. Rolled down the driver's window and stared at him. He stared back.

“Your lights?” he pointed out. “You know, usually people drive with their lights on in the dark.”

And I swung easily into action. “Oh man! Sorry sir! I just left the flat now-now. I was in such a hurry I must of forgot. Stupid me!” (I was taken aback for a moment. Did I just say that?)

“Have you been drinking?”

“No! Nooo,” I smiled a smile of total disbelief. (What a question! Did he just ask me that?)

“Your licence?” he said.

And like a good girl I handed over. He looked closely, poring over the small card. Looked back at me. “Very pretty.” I smiled too broadly. Was he being serious?

He bent down slowly and peered into the quiet car, all of us perked up bright-eyed and bushy tailed, clean as a whistle.

He shook his head. “Kids!” And then he waved us on.

Suddenly set free, in the clear, the car exploded with sound. Whoops. Exclamations. “Yoh bra!” “Fuck!” “You got the things?” Voices remixed and mashed up between us, the celebratory house music pumping.

*Can we take it slow,
There's no need to rush, nothing baby.
If I let you take control,
With the promise you won't enslave me.*

*We could do this all alone.
Coz I know, of a place we can go if you,
Let me set the tone,
I will show you my mind and my soul if you let me know,
Tasting like a paradise, where you can make believe.
Anything is possible and all aint what it seems,
Place your mind away in time and never disbelieve.
Life is like a fairytale and love is just a dream.*

I was still so quiet I could barely breathe and as we drove down to the beach I found myself thinking. How sometimes you go through a hold-your-breath situation, you know, when your short life flashes before you? Cliché or not, that's what happens. Sometimes, you don't think you're gonna make it home. And when you do, when everything's just fine after all, when you come out alive the other side with a bunch of people you hardly know, then there's that click moment and you realise these are your bras. Your homies. So what now, you wonder, where's the move? I sat there a long time, wondering. Lonng time. And I'm still thinking about it now, right here in my little ice cube Cashbox.

Late Skate

That week, the rink was buzzing. Intriguing whispers and sideways glances sparked my suspicion; I lent ears to the right, and to the left, my eyes straining to read people's lips. I couldn't make sense of it. I figured it was all just the long weekend coming up, so people were plotting their great escapes. I mean even Alice was going away for the weekend. I know, right? I even had to double check with Uncle G. Alice. Not working. Off on an Easter egg hunt maybe, could be, except that woman's inner-child seemed to have been grounded for life.

Friday afternoon I'd written one of the longest exams in my life. Half an hour, in reality, but when it came to me and Geography I felt I'd been forced to travel the whole world in fast forward, leaving me with a serious case of jetlag. And those invigilators? Watching you like you're a terrorist. I thought that test had finally finished me off, but when I slugged down the ramp towards the rink, when the doors opened and that chilled air gushed out, it was as if the rink breathed life right back in to me. I was back. Plus there was Uncle G, his usual self, bouncing happy down the passage, all chilled, his voice echoing big and bubbly in the empty afternoon space. I had a Coca-Cola moment right then, because G had cracked Open Happiness. Although, just before he headed back to skate-hire his mischievous smile had me thinking, what now?

He left me in the dark, totally, no clue what he was plotting. Me and the others passed our time as usual that evening, sitting outside, waiting for random Rinkrats to pull in and drop out. They smoked, we spoke. Kenny tried his luck with some white girls again, telling them something about how he was gonna perform live with his cousin Eminem at the Bat Centre next month, and they should drop by. Free tickets, promise. Now I knew Kenny was slim but that story was way beyond shady. Mind you, he managed to score two phone numbers so I guess he felt like quite the player. He was smiling as if he held the R3-million Lotto ticket.

Reagan was there too, fiddling with his phone. G watched him. Shook his head like, What, this boy was born typing? Why'd God give him a mouth also, surely not just for KFC? "Reagan," he said eventually, "your fingers don't always have to do the walking; you could actually go see someone. Face-to-face. Try talking maybe? With your voice?"

I know. So maybe you don't believe me. You think it's too incredible. But then you would. You wouldn't understand how this exclusive Late Night Skate session was the very devil that threatened everything Alice and her swanky English co-owners believed in. Management didn't do all-nighters, they didn't see the money in that. Or the fun for that matter. So we were about to take a major risk. I'm talking mutiny! And this demanded precise execution.

But we talked and planned and had things covered. We'd use Sunday to run mission clean-up, and the next time Alice balanced the income and expenditure, coining it all alone up in her office, she'd watch the scales, speechless, as they tipped all the way to the bank. Who would think to complain then?

Because we were talking thirty bucks a head, see, a few hundred people through the door. Plus! Half of them would forget to bring socks but we'd have them covered at a special deal- just R10 a pair. It was a win-win situation.

We had one day to pull off this plan, so we all pulled together. Like, we needed free advertising, and fast, and that's when Reagan suggested Uncle G write a few letters to people, telling them the news. "Or," said Reags, "was technology suddenly man enough for this mission?"

And all the guys cracked up then, seeing as G had no choice now but to warm up to technology. He didn't look too pleased.

"Don't panic, mechanic," Reags said, "a once-upon-a-time signwriter like you was, an' still plotting to overthrow Durban at minus three degrees? We can get you with the times, G, no problem."

The guys all agreed to help the old man, and G said "Watch who you calling *old*, eh". He said he would manage, that it wasn't *blueteeth* or what all he needed, just a sms- that's all. But oh goodness he kept messing up the *prescriptive* text; said he didn't like for some machine to tell him what he meant to say. Bad enough us youngsters were always trying to put words in his mouth, he said, and now this thing.

But things came right slowly, and after a quick call from the Cashbox even the DJ was booked. Everyone who'd left town this Easter was gonna wish they'd stuck around. Soon enough everyone who mattered in Durban knew what was going down at the rink. Every Rinkrat told every friend and relative, plus all the random contacts we chatted to but didn't really know, people you'd only met in edited photos but felt like you grew up with. Everyone was in. Instant status updates, comments, and questions, connections were flowing. Alert

tones rang suburb to suburb, and every time I saw someone reading something on a phone my excitement levels amped even higher.

I felt so alive. It's like everything was happening right here, where we were. The ice rink had become the centre of the universe and even the sky, when I looked up between the high buildings; it seemed the moon was wishing hard, longing to come home.

But G cut through my thoughts with his idea that we needed an actual banner to hang outside, somewhere visible, you know, on Brickhill Road. And though we laughed – seriously, did he think LNS was a kids' party? – we thought okay, why not, we were down with some fun, and while he manned the Cashbox that Saturday, the Rinkrats got down to some creative business with a large white sheet and spray paint. I can still hear the shaking, the beads knocking in the cans. Smell the excellent fumes. Our graffiti left no talent unturned.

One main mover Uncle G called up was Kathy. He needed her. LNS needed her! Aunty Kathy, see, she was the specialist of specialists, the most special, the only woman he could call on in such momentous, undercover circumstances. She had years of experience in handling such classified matters, so she was the perfect woman for the job. That G! Seems he could still be pretty smooth with the ladies, even over the phone. His charm did the trick, and Aunty Kathy was in. She agreed to run the Cashbox during the big all-nighter. And of course her lips would be sealed.

So I was free, outta the box for the big night; I'd managed to escape. Yeah, we Rinkrats would have to be on crowd control that night, but you know- the only real way to beat 'em was to join 'em. So we'd be skating up a snow storm. For that one night, forget the ordinary public, we were V.I.P. It was *our* ice party and the plebs had to leave the ball before the ice melted. Exactly at midnight. But not us.

We could skate on forever, till morning came. I could already imagine the world outside, disconnected. Crashed on dead batteries. How inside the rink there'd be no time at all, the dark lights just the same, the music only maybe turned a little quiet. And your body slowly turning cold against itself, the ice wet and slick, kicking up sheets of water, gliding, creating shallow waves that splashed the others before you came to a flash, professional halt. That's how it would be. And you'd walk outside, like taking your first steps, really, because your feet were dead numb. Out there'd be only the early sky, no sun just yet, no life properly in circulation except you and the other Rinkrats, everyone drawn close and into their thoughts. You'd look and maybe see just some shadow pulling up a blind, a light behind a frosted glass

window come on, or some clouds parting. Then the sun drawing an eyelid open all lonely and still. And then a wink, just for you.

7:00pm: The DJ checked in, and while he set up inside the rink we sat outside talking about who we'd heard was coming and how the rink would be jumpin' in less than an hour.

7:20pm: The basslines started to rattle the glass doors; the Cashbox window was shaking.

Ready to rock, G stood up, grabbed his stetson and grinned. Show time!

The first taxi rolled in, and soon the road was packed, taxis stopping double-breasted and impatient, dropping off ten, twenty teenagers at a time. And what a cast. Peeps stepped out as if they were leaving their Limos to strut down the red carpet. Camera phones flashing, the crowd buzzing, things were Jumping! Samson jumpsuits, Levi jeans, Lacoste tracksuits, gold hoop earrings, name chains all topped with some sleek hairstyles: the ramps were lined up with every sort of Durban. Adidas, Vans, Superga...every brand leading to one little Cashbox and one focused Aunty Kathy, whose fingers had begun to work overtime.

The ice was it for most people (never mind the one couple hiding among the top row seats, already making out like it's nobody's business). Everyone was going around and around, the blades scoring huge circles over and over in the grooves like an endless vinyl. The DJ flipped the switch to the centre light:

Flashing Lights, Lights

Flashing Lights, Lights

Flashing Lights, Lights

Flashing Lights, Lights

*She don't believe in shootin' stars,
But she believes in clothes and cars
Wooden floors in the new apartment,
Couture from the store's department...*

Kanye West! My eyes were closed; I was so into it, rapping to a Coke can. Woke up to find myself being watched. No one I knew, but he sure was a cutey. Damn. Did he really just see me do that? He smiled. Walked towards me and held his can of Fanta up to toast. I blushed and knocked cans with him.

“You’re suppose’ to look me in my eyes when we toast,” he said, holding his can up again, touching mine.

*As I recall, I know you love to show off
But I never thought that you would take it this far*

I toasted as shyly as before. What? Why does he wanna toast again now, didn’t we just do that already?

*What do I know? Flashing lights, lights
What do I know? Flashing lights, lights*

Just then, the ice struck midnight and Kenny picked up the mic, “Haazit everybody! Yurl know it’s very very late now hey! It’s time for the rink to go to bed. So please get your ass and your skates to skate-hire. Otherwise we gonna sell your shoes at Suncoast just now. An’ yurl know I will hey! Who wants to walk to Suncoast barefoot huh? Le’vai! Meet yurl there, lukka.” And he dropped the mic, kinda like *his cousin* Eminem does in 8 Mile. Really, did he just do that? Wow. So the fine line between a rap battle and an ice rink announcement actually exists! And all it took was a one-man-wannabe-cypher to prove it.

But WTF? What happened to our plans. Weren’t we supposed to have our own late night skate? Have the rink all to ourselves?

Maybe I’d been dreaming, after all.

I hung around a bit, reluctant to leave. I watched the last of the ice settle into a glossy pool. In the dull light, the last fading hope of excitement, there did seem to be more slippery water than ice left. It would take hours before it froze over.

I sat there on a wet blue chair. I felt so cold. Puddles of water everywhere: on the stairs, near skate hire, outside the milkbar. Flat and shiny on the black rubber matting. An oil slick coating me. Chilled. Suffocated to the bone.

Even later, when Uncle G came by to say it was time to leave, saying he had to lock up, even when he filled me in on the whopping twenty four grand we’d made in total, even then I couldn’t be pleased.

I thought of everything, especially of the others, already gone on to the casino, and my feet made their own decision to follow. There seemed nothing else to do. Nowhere else to go.

When I got there, the ice crowd was still buzzing, all in a mood to match the bright lights and the noisy slot machines. There seemed no stopping them.

Kay caught my sleeve. “Hey! Why so down, missy? Didn’t you get his number or what?”

“Huh? What you on about?”

“What you mean? I saw you with him. I was right there laughing while he seemed to enjoy your rapping to a Coke can and all.”

“That guy from just now at the rink? It was nothing.”

“Ja-aaa! Except he’s Mr uShaka woman! Haven’t you seen him all over Facebook? And don’t pretend like all you did was knock cans! Where you been all this time, hey?” She gave me a wicked look.

“No! That *was* all we did. And twice actually. God knows why.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

I felt so tired, but I stared at her, trying to figure out what the hell I missed.

“Bra! He asked you to look him in the eye! And not once. *Twice*. Can’t you fucking *read*?” Her mouth made a sort of rectangle shape stressing that last word.

“You serious?”

Why oh why must this always happen to me? How could I not see it? Not recognise those sexy eyebrows? How could I not read those luscious lips? How? And those ripped abs...

I musta thought out loud cos Kay finished my sentence, “...all oiled and waiting! Well Kim, the wait’s over. You missed it!”

I thought about trying to find him. Maybe he was here at Suncoast somewhere, among all the flashing and the tinging and plinking. I looked around at the people, everyone either full-on focussed or totally flat. Rubbing the screens of slot machines, a sweep of lucky palms, exercising power they really don’t have.

But sure I could do it. I could find him. If Mr uShaka wanted to look in my eyes, I’d let him. I’d look back. I could be deep. I was a deep girl, and I’d let him know it. I wasn’t only Coke and Fanta and knocking cans. I knew what was what.

But Kay was laughing and shaking her head. “It’s too late, man. Too late. The moment’s long gone.”

I sighed.

“Shit, and to think, we coulda got in to uShaka for free whenever we wanted!” Kay blabbed,
“All that rapping of yours, and for what huh! Stick to your day job bra. For real.”

And I sighed even more deeply this time, knowing I’d have to.

Short Cuts

White coat, tan trousers and gleaming Crockett & Jones laced up tight, my daily uniform as I unlocked the door to Brown's Barbershop every morning around eight-thirty, the doorway to a world of scissors and snipping and buzzing from nine am till late afternoon. Except for lunchtime of course, which was filled with crunching, flashbacks and gossip...

As the door opened, Sammy and Jo moved their checkers game inside. Goodness knows what time they got there. Those two were a local institution, just like North Beach, which gave you no reason to leave. What for, why travel when the area had everything? A Medical Centre, Pick 'n Pay, Spar ('Good for You!'); butcher, baker, tailor Plus an ice rink, a casino, a petrol station, a video store, an ATM, a skate park. And restaurants and take-aways from everywhere in the world, with the families to match.

"Comin' ladies?" I held the door for Sammy and Jo.

"Morning Browns ... sure thing, lovely day for checks," replied Sammy.

When wasn't it? They played this game every day and forever and were already into their third round by the time I arrived. A team for life, Sammy and Jo, both of them never looking a day older. And even though Jo seldom spoke except through grimaces, I could never imagine the two separated unless it was by the checker board set between them, red and black squares lined up and ready to face the challenge.

One by one my apprentices pulled in. Dean was always the first. Tall, dark and neat, handsome too, I suppose, with brogues shinier than mine. He'd taken tradition to heart, had Dean; probably been spit shining since the first long distance competition in primary. Said he was the only nine year old to spit across his block and on to the window with pink curtains in the flat next to his. Considered a pretty big achievement.

Sometime after Dean arrived, we'd hear rap music bumping up the road before we saw anything. And then through the front window we'd watch the blue Golf 1 pull up. Calvin. Clearly he hadn't gotten lucky at the club last night, because he was almost on time for work today. Tough breaks.

And then, of course, Jane, standing in the middle of the front entrance, kissing her boyfriend goodbye like she hadn't had breakfast. When they surfaced, she smiled all frisky at him as he grabbed her ass tight and gave her one last peck before she clocked in to work.

"Tjoh girl! Mo-oove. Some of us got a job to get to." Calvin split the love birds and pushed in behind Jane, heading straight to his chair in the front. But she just chewed her gum and strolled across, nice and casual. No man gonna tell her what to do. Except maybe her latest love.

As they set up their chairs, I walked over to my radio on the shelf, nestled between two pot plants. Lush green ferns. My Elly sure did love a fern; she'd have them lined up in those rope hangers on the balcony. Mac...mac...something. (It'll come to me.) Just give them a little, she always said – water, light, love – and they give back plenty. These were putting out fronds from here to Umhlanga.

"Come on B! Metro's playing the jams!" A voice broke my thoughts.

"Don't you ever get enuffa 2pac Calvin?" shouted Jane.

"He's too much," added Sammy from the background. "More like scrap music than rap music if you ask me!"

"Crap music? How watkind Sammy?"

Though I almost didn't hear any of the conversation. It was The Staple Singers – Do It Again. My jam. I turned and smiled at Elly near my chair. (Yes, I got it: *macramé*!) She smiled back. I knew she remembered. Meeting at the neighbourhood disco every Friday night in the community hall where everyone knew us and we only knew the dance floor and each other.

My eyes closed, head in that Stevie Wonder sway, right finger snapping to the beat.

"Ooh, you go Mr B!" yelled Jane.

"Da ballie's got some groove ay Jo," said Calvin laughing, but Jo was so fixed on the checker board he probably didn't even realise his left foot was tapping the white ceramic tile to the beat.

My right foot tapped as I stepped and snapped, leaning forward then back again. I spun around and bum jived all the way back to the counter where I winked at my lady in the gold frame, super smooth.

Just about then the buzz picked up, so I had to cool it and handle business, which was coming at us from all sides. Big men. Small men. Choose your colour and your style. Loose baggy jeans with Pointer T-s and bright BapeSTA sneakers, right down to the little guy imitating his father. There he was, kid sitting in the big man's chair for the first time, undergoing the first in a long series of initiations that his life would demand.

Kids like that reminded me of Wade, my nephew. Laaitie used to spend most of his time in the shop with me, kind of like my personal midget assistant. Before he cut me out for cars, chicks and jorls. What to do though, ay? (I look over at Elly in her frame.) What's done ...

Around noon Jane always takes lunch orders. Today she favoured Crazy Foods, which I bet had something to do with the new Indian boy working the till. That girl! Jane always compensated for her pale skin by chatting up bruin ous. Suresh was her latest, and she giggled at her phone every time he messaged her. These Blackberries. They made things too easy; got people behaving strangely. She was talking to herself, repeating...her...message...as...she...typed. She didn't even seem to realise she did this every time, slipping into the seamless virtual world.

By the time she got back with our orders, they were only sun-warmed and her hair was way more frizzy than before she left. And that, I'm telling you, it wasn't the wind.

At the smell of lunch, old Jo looked up all anxious from the checkers. His eyes were popping out the sockets screaming hunger, even though his mouth stayed shut.

"Don't worry Jo-Jo," chirped Jane, "We all know what's your favourite." She handed him the packet and he smiled, setting the food carefully between him and Sammy. Beans bunny with mutton gravy. They would share, as usual.

Calvin turned the door sign to 'CLOSED' as we ate, and in the silence – between the DJ on the radio, and the cars driving by on the street – all you could hear was the crunching of

lettuce and the last bit of cold-drink being slurped from the can. Until Wade barged in. Whoa. A big surprise.

“Ow Uncle B! What say?” he grabbed my right hand and hugged me with his left, street style.

“Can’t you read?” asked Dean as he walked towards the door and flipped the sign to ‘OPEN’.

“Please, I can never be knocking when I come into my own home,” countered Wade, and he threw himself into my chair and spun it around to face the mirror, checking himself out.

“Neat on the sides and number two on top, Unc, you know how the ladies like it.”

I got busy, and in a while the usual afternoon crowd began to draw in, so it was all hair clippers buzzing and scissors flashing. On the radio the topic was who should do the cooking at home. Him, or Her.

“I’d cook for my woman,” smirked Wade. “Have her coming back for more cause I’m a charmer like my uncle. Ha, Uncle Brown?” And his face, reflected in the mirror, looked up at mine for confirmation. I just shrugged, snipping away.

“I’d like my food on the table when I get home,” said Dean.

“Well, at Calvin’s house the only food you’d get is burned!” laughed Jane, snapping her scissors dangerously at Calvin, who pretended not to notice.

Gently I brushed the back of Wade’s neck then held a hand mirror behind him, at his nape.

“Neat as ever. Shot Uncle B!”

And I whipped the towel off, spinning the chair around like he was a little boy again.

He laughed as he stepped out; looked at me like ‘Cool it, old man!’ and said with a grin, “Man, all this is gonna be mine one day!” He taunted Calvin too, biting his fist briefly in his mouth like oooh I’m a scared girl. Said, “Yeah, that’s right Big C, you gonna be working for *me* one day”.

“Alright now Wade,” I said, “You go straight home, you heard me.” But the door had already swung shut, masking my words. Wade. I knew he wasn’t going home, not Wade; not with that new cut. He had to glay, as they say, show it off for a bit.

Just a short stroll away was the ragged side of town, owned by street rats that always looked like they just woke up, even at two in the afternoon. They dressed the same every day, come rain or shine, South Beach tattooed all over, in ink from melted Woodstock bands and poor attempts at shading. The latest trend was a bright T-shirt, either orange or purple, and their jeans were always hanging low. I never saw the need for showing off that space between where their pants should sit and where the seat clung to their bums. Call it the generation gap if you must. And always something covering their heads, some cap or beanie or hoody. Nothing nice, you know, with a neat turned brim to doff politely. No, they were a wild looking bunch. Though it wasn’t only appearances that had led me to warn Wade not to hang out with them. That lot meant business. Serious business. Too many times I’d seen them leaning into car windows and shaking hands.

I didn’t want my nephew mixed up in all that. But Wade is Wade. Wade will be Wade. He mingles with all sorts and enjoys it. Which could be the makings of a good barber, maybe. Could be.

The barbershop ticked over as usual for about a month. We had our busy days, and some quieter times. When things dipped, there was music, laughter and good old-fashioned conversation to keep our little family going.

Wade also came by sometimes, dropped in after school just to say hello and to mock Calvin, who always took the bait.

Afterwards, Wade would head down to South Beach for a bit before he went home. I didn’t like it. He was a good child at heart. He knew that street life was no good. How often had I warned him about spending too much time with those guys? But was he listening? You tell me.

It was always the same story with boys. If you’d schooled in town, like I did, you’d know that most boys aspired to be TDKs; they carried a screw driver in the pocket and had a Lacoste tracksuit in the cupboard. The gang name was carved into almost all the school desks. But if you hadn’t been shot, didn’t wear a thick chain in silver or gold, and didn’t live

at Club Zoom in its hey-days ... then you pretty much had nothing to prove you were a TDK besides your tjoons or your relatives.

Wade knew. He'd seen the gang give his father a lifestyle then take away his life without even asking. He was only a small boy when it happened. And now. Now he thinks he got everything sorted, that he understands how life works. (I looked across at Elly and shook my head.) Ever since his father ran out of time, I'd looked out for Wade like my own.

The first week of every month was my busiest. Something to do with fresh starts, perhaps, or otherwise just my routine customers, men who liked to keep it clean. Nothing like the feeling of coming out the barber all smooth, and holding yourself up like you're a *That Ou*. I know it. The feeling's kept me going my whole life.

Clipped conversations flew across the shop from chair to chair; the scissors seemed to snip faster, the clippers almost keeping time. Even the ferns seemed to find this thirsty work and they needed more water. Lucky Elly was there to remind me.

Things were good. A few long lost pals popped in, and there was also the regulars, the old familiars. Sammy and Jo were still at their same old checkers, no winner or loser in sight.

Yet something was missing. Wade hadn't come around for his haircut that week. Maybe he had a lot of schoolwork, I thought, possibly too much because he hadn't even been to the ice rink, the girls said. His skates were growing rust in the back room, and Goolam would probably sell them if he didn't turn up soon. You couldn't keep space for someone who didn't show.

It was only next Monday that Wade bounced into the shop, greeting everyone all chilled and hugging me to his chest with one hand, like there'd been no break in routine.

He sat in my chair and said, "Take it all off Uncle B."

For just a second the whole shop paused, then I spun the chair around and put the towel around his neck. "Trying something new, are we? Durban heat getting too much?"

He smirked. "Well the block is hot, you know that."

When I was done, Wade rubbed the nub of his head and pulled his black sunglasses out the top pocket of his school shirt. Placed them on his forehead and gave everyone a heads up.

We didn't see him for the rest of the week. Calvin and Jane actually agreed on something for once; they said I shouldn't worry, that I should just let him be young, a little bit. So that's what I did. Left him alone, no worries.

Two weeks after, a group of Jane's girlfriends come by the shop, eating Dinky donuts and cackling away.

"...and that cutie hanging on Gillespie corner?"

"Ja, he's a new one..."

"Heard he's getting *paid* too."

The chatter fell in the air like itchy clippings, and settled with the rest of the split ends on the messy floor.

Jane turned to look at me. Calvin too.

I just kept working, pretending I didn't understand.

"I've seen it happen one too many times," said Dean quietly, as he wiped his razor with a small white towel.

That night, I lay in my bed wondering how I'd let this happen. The only time I spent on the streets was going to and from the barbershop, but it seemed they had a mean streak, a way of following me inside and always keeping me informed. The next day a solemn gloom shadowed the shop. I hardly spoke. Even Elly didn't smile at me.

Around six that evening, just as I was leaving the shop, brown leather briefcase in hand and struggling to pull the door closed, a figure in baggy jeans ran around the corner. He stumbled. He shoved me back inside and slammed the door, both of us falling heavily on the briefcase. Next thing it's police cars rushing by, screaming that side around the other corner, sirens cutting through the dinner tables of the all the family flats.

It's like I'm not breathing, waiting for it to happen. The knife. The bullet. I know it's the end. Just then the street lights come on, *blink*, and it's over. In the sudden dim glow I see that it's Wade.

He's breathing in gasps. Then crying. Hard. But we get up off the floor and he scrabbles over to my chair and slumps. I turn the shop light back on. Wade's roughened head hangs low. I go to him and lift his chin in one hand. Then I break the silence, switching on the clippers.

"I got caught up," he says eventually.

The only sound from me is the clippers buzzing.

"Everything was going good, Uncle B, then Eddy started swearing Magz, then Magz threw a punch. I tried to stop them but Eddy beat me down. He took out his knife. Everybody on the street ran to Gillespie. I saw Magz on the floor, a whole crowd around them but no one done anything! The police were getting closer. So I ran ..."

I switched the clippers off and opened the razor, checking the blade. Quietly I bent his head forward and began to neaten the edges. Once I'd done his sideburns I snapped the blade shut, then pulled the towel from his shoulders.

"Uncle B," he said softly, "this. This life isn't for me."

I brushed his slender neck, felt the slightest rough of hair, like grit against the grain of my fingers. We looked at each other in the mirror and then he left.

That night, much later, something shocks me awake. Something. I feel confused. Somewhere I hear a phone ringing. Maybe in a flat over there, that block with the blue dolphin mosaic on the front wall. I hear the landline ring and ring. Then there's a loud cry. A woman. I can't really see, but she holds the phone to her chest and sinks slowly to the floor. There is a terrible sound coming from her mouth. Or maybe it's the tears from her eyes.

Two. Fr/agile

In Grade three, I made an egg lady for show and tell. It was really something. You know the first time you discover how to turn an egg in to a person? Fascinating right? Plus mine was completely out of the ordinary because my best friend Shahnaaz had given me a quail's egg. No boring chicken shit for me.

Her father's Chinese friends had come down for the weekend to check on their shop, and they stayed over at the Mohamed's. They also brought Old Lady Tsu with.

"And I mean *ol*", said Shahnaaz. "And *stubborn*. Everyone thought she must rather stay home."

Shahnaaz overheard them complaining. But Old Mrs Tsu wasn't being left anywhere. Down she came with her son who came with *his* son to check on the grandson or whatever who was managing the newest branch of the family business.

"That's a lot of quails' eggs," I pointed out to Shahnaaz, but she said no, they were specially for the Old Mrs. She ate them raw, for good health, four or five a day, poking the shell of each little egg with a long fingernail. Then she sucked.

"It was disgusting," shivered Shahnaaz. "But she's saying "Vey ni, vey ni!" And she actually offers me some."

"So, did you try it or what?" I joked, "Or you chicken?"

And Shahnaaz made that ha-ha face and crinkled up her eyes.

"Really, she was strange, hey. 'Me no wa' ten can ek!'"

I cracked up laughing.

"Honest. That's what it sounded like when she was carrying on, I couldn't understand her half the time. And she was always very cross. Moaning. She says to her son she won't eat KFC. 'Oni wiw it fesh quey ek!'"

"I thought she was going to have a heart attack, she was so angry. Everyone else just ignored her so she comes to me, right. Like I know what to do. I just picked up another egg and gave it to her. What else, you know?"

When the weekend was almost over Shahnaaz stole a few eggs. Said she needed to investigate. Made no sense to me. I never knew what she hoped to find.

So she had three little eggs, their beige shells with dark freckles. Were they pretty or pretty ugly? She couldn't decide. She saw a shape like a car. Another like a dog. She even saw a country, and on one clear side, the whole sky. Then she'd wanted to see inside so she'd poked an egg hard with a pencil and the snot oozed out on her fingers, white and yellow, like any egg. After that she chucked it away.

"I hope you washed your hands!" I said, when she came round to bring my quail egg. She shrugged.

I didn't always understand Shahnaaz. About the eggs, for example, where were these investigations going? An egg was an egg. Thinking about eggs so much made no sense to me. But still I was glad to have the present. It meant she'd thought of me.

I kept my quail's egg a whole week, swaddled in cotton wool. Safe from the dangerous world of frying pans and table edges. And of course clumsy school children. Then, in front of my class, I blew it. It wasn't easy. It was so small and I didn't want to break it. I poked a hole in the top and bottom with a needle, grinding holes. Then I puffed up with all my eight year old might and slowly slowly blew out the liquid world inside.

I was careful not to suck, not after the Granny Tsu stories. But the slight smell made me think how it would taste, a quail when it wasn't even born.

Also, I felt very grown up in front of the class, explaining every step like a teacher.

Confidently, I used a thin black marker to draw a mouth, two eyes, and long eyelashes. I soaked some cotton wool in red food colouring, and squeezed, and glued and teased. Soon, my egg lady had lovely red hair. My little quail's egg had turned into a beautiful little egg-lady.

And she was certainly more beautiful than some of the other children's projects. Brandon made a hopeless Christmas decoration thingie from cardboard toilet rolls, all coloured in and joined together. What was that? It was a bit disturbing, really.

For a start, I mean, he was probably sitting there on the cold seat, straining, wrapping too much toilet paper around his hand, when the inspiration hit him. It must have seemed like a good idea at the time.

I bet every time he went somewhere he checked the toilets to see if any rolls were near the end. All that collecting. Plus every colour he painted them took on a horrible shade of brown. It's not even a nice story, you know, for the class. When it's finished, everybody looks bored. They just want you to go away. Poor Brandon.

But my egg lady was so beautiful everybody wanted a chance to hold her. I wouldn't let them. I put some pieces of cloth in a little TV Bar box I picked up outside the tuck shop, and I nestled her safe, using another piece of material for a blanket. So carefully I put the blanket over her. Her face. Her body. I couldn't really tell.

I carried her close for the whole day, keeping her safe, letting only those who seemed genuinely interested have a sneak peek. Because I was saving my triumph for my family when I got home. I wanted to flourish the new addition.

I don't have to tell you what happened. You can work that out for yourself.

The figure skating club held their lessons every Saturday morning, a few hours before the first public session. The girls all wore shimmering stockings and fitted red jackets. A uniform, I suppose, but it always looked very glamorous to me.

Just before ten o' clock they dissolved one by one, all except a tiny little figure fairy who chatted to me while she waited for her mother. Even in her regulation red jacket, that girl stood out. Skin pale, almost white, a scattering of light freckles. Her lips very pink and frizzy red hair tied back as sleek and tight as possible. Her head looked so bare like that, but she never seemed to be shaken by the cold.

Sometimes she was chatting and laughing away, telling me about her grade five hockey tournament. The goal she scored. Other times she just hung around the front entrance with her backpack, waiting quietly for her mother. Even then, she still smiled politely though, opening the door for a few customers.

She was like that. Often, from my perch in the Cashbox I saw her being kind and polite, showing unfamiliar customers the way to the toilet as they clunked along the sodden rubber mats in shaky blades. You'll get there, she seemed to be saying, offering subtle encouragement.

Some Saturdays, when her mother remembered to give her spending money, she stayed after her class and skated during the first public session. Then, when she bought something from the milkbar she came over to me in the Cashbox, happy to share her chips and sweets.

Mostly, I couldn't look out for her, cooped up as I was working, but I did wonder. Where was she when I couldn't see her? Was she lost in the crowd? Helping others skate for the first time? Picking up falling public before their hands stuck to patches of dry ice? Did she show off her jumps and twirls, that little red jacket bright as a bulls-eye? I didn't know.

Between the smiling and the sharing and the showing, the child's mind always seemed to slip back to her mother and when I looked she'd be on her phone, punching the numbers over and over again, hoping for an answer.

I'd seen her mother at the roadside, waiting impatiently for the girl to come up the ramp after lessons. Next to her a man, tall, thin, big-eared. A few weeks after that, another man. Also tall, but a few shades darker, with awkward hair that grew past his shoulders and gave him a somewhat beastly appearance. Different cars all the time as well. Sometimes a Golf, sometimes a Polo, once a black Toyota Run X waited while her mother came impatiently down the ramp to fetch her. Always tinted windows. Always.

On one particular Saturday the girl's mother didn't pick her up at all. Instead she was escorted to the car by a man with dark gold curls, a bit frizzy from the wind that day, and gold rings on all nine of his fingers. Well, also one thumb. I remember his hands more than anything. I thought about how I wore nothing on my own hands, preferring to remain anonymous. Then again maybe he did too, behind his dark Wayfarer glasses and all. I don't know. I don't know because his hands, even without all that screaming gold, still demanded so much attention.

The little figure skater didn't turn around to wave goodbye that day. She just got into the car very carefully. Carefully she lifted her skates in their padded case, but still her thin legs looked as if they might break.

Only Rinkrats

The ice rink was a small frozen pond, shrink-wrapped back when the front of the building was condemned. Half ruined. The big blue doors below the old Ocean City sign sealed off; the high windows boarded up with wooden planks spattered with pigeon shit.

To stop anyone from entering, I wondered, or to stop something from leaving? The place was spooky like that, plus it was home to an extended family of black cats with yellow eyes. The intense sort of yellow I'd seen when Uncle G fried turmeric powder with onions and oil, cooking up a quick something for lunch. (No, no *cats* on the menu, please. What kind of rats do you think we are?)

The cats all looked the same, and all nothing like kitties. How many I wasn't sure, the way they lurked and loitered in the darkness, shadowing one into another. Though they could be coaxed, cautiously, *sps sps sps*, by a hand holding food. The slightest hint of dinner and they'd spill out beyond the realm of gloom, thick and oily. And I mean any sort of food, people. A jam sandwich, for example.

Uncle G had a big bunch of keys, a big, noisy bunch that hung from the front loop of his trousers. He kept the keys right where he could find them. Mostly, the keys looked the same to me, except for the really long one that opened the safe in the office when I needed change. And the one key which, I knew, was extra special. That one opened up the cat cave or, as we knew it, The Rinkrats' Secret Playground. Only we were allowed to enter the collapsed, dark side of the rink through a small wooden door just past the girls' toilets.

A warm wind fingered a gap in this door now and again, pushing through the odd pigeon feather. Which was better than shit, at least, though I was sometimes uneasy about the breeze. How to read it. Was it playful? Was it planning to blow up a storm? This part of the world, a person never exactly knew. The day could start off still, and by lunch it was ramped up to brisk, and later, the weather was tied up in hectic knots, the loose boards flapping like huge trapped birds, the air whistling right inside your head. But also the wind could play quieter tricks, and you'd be bundled up against the chill when really the day turned out still and calm.

Some Sundays, business was slow. One of those days, something to do with *rugby*, the Sharks and the Bulls, G decided to spice things up. Turn up the heat and get things lively. I could see him scheming before he said a word. The entire morning he walked snappily up and down, smiling too wide, whistling to the tune of his keys. If you caught his eye, he only smiled wider, and one eyebrow did that little dance. G kept us on edge when he got like that; you knew he was up to something.

Times like that, I felt more cooped up than ever in the Cashbox, like a prisoner having to watch the guard make a casual show of doing his rounds. Something was cooking. And I wanted out the Cashbox so I could be in on the fun.

Around one, Kaye and Lauren popped up behind me in the Cashbox, “Boo!” and I could tell G’s sneaky little mood had rubbed off on them too.

“Busy there?” asked Kaye, dangling G’s key stash right in front of me.

“... What? What you all up to?”

“Uncle G,” she said knowingly. He’d said Kenny and Reags look really bored sitting on the wall outside? What if we all...

And so the plot thickened.

We were old hands; we knew how it worked. We’d been Rinkrats for ages already, not like those fresh boys, still new to the game though they seemed to think three months or what was a long time to have been hanging around the ice rink. Like they earned their colours already or something. Months? Please. Me, I’m coming *years* now.

So it was definitely time for some good old fashioned fun. Maybe there was no more initiation allowed in schools, all the rules and regulations to tie you up tight, but this was on our own time, wasn’t it? We were after hours and free to be. So me and the girls squeezed altogether into the Cashbox to make a plan while G kept the laaities entertained outside.

Kenny and Reags, they sat there in the heat in those oversized hoodies, smoking in the sunshine like they had all day. So stupid. I mean, how come they didn’t wonder why G, of all people, offered them his cigarettes? Hadn’t they learnt anything about anyone, after three months down here? But nah, they were too cool, those two, too caught up in their own selves. They obviously figured they were just super special in G’s eyes so they deserved special attention. Hot shots. By the end of the day, I knew, it would all look very different. Cos

Kenny and Reags were about to have their own customised tour of the unknown. And what these young ones, these laaities, didn't know, just happened to be second nature to us.

Kaye zipped home to The Blue Waters. Yeah, the hotel. She lived in the actual hotel. Permanently. Her mother worked there, and live-ins got all the privileges, I tell you. Anyway, she needed to get her paintball gun cos we needed weapons for our mission. Lauren went to the Spar across the road to buy balloons, then off to the LADIES to fill them up. Water balloons in all colours would be flying shortly, creating liquid rainbows. Although the only treasure would be the memory of it all, we were gonna show them a time they'd never forget! While things ticked over, I stepped outside a second to chat with Uncle G, who was telling our two suckers about the old days when he worked at Ocean City, the cinema which used to be part of the big ice rink set up.

“This place was *it*; highlight of Durban. Parents could leave their kids to skate at the rink while they enjoyed some romantic time at the movies next door.”

“And what about the under eighteen club, Uncle G?” I asked, while Kenny and Reags leaned in, keen to be part of things.

“*That?* You know when I say this place was lively, I mean *hap'ning!* Everyone pulling up in over-loaded cars. Girls dressed to impress in those shift dresses plus smelling of sweet spring flowers.”

I made an impressed face, like Ooooh.

“No, serious, this building was hot. On both sides. Entertainment central. If the people weren't skating, they were dancing. If they weren't dancing they ... never mind. The walls were *shaking*. Ay, I've worked inside this building for so many years, but I'm sure even these walls know a few things I missed. You know what they say, If only the walls could talk!”

“Yoh G,” I said, making a sad-girl-face, “It feels like I missed all the fun.”

He winked. “Well maybe not all of it, Kimmy girl.”

And that's about when things really began.

Kenny and Reags stood there, little and big like some David and Goliath, but both with baggy jeans and main ou attitudes. Once the door creaked open slowly, none of us could see further than our noses. Lost in that creepy place, only the light from my phone kept hope alive. But those two pretended to play it casual, acting like walking into the void was nothing new. And

being gentlemen, they stepped aside and let me walk first, of course, then Kenny followed, with a little push from Reags.

Inside it was as black and dark as the Toughees school shoes I grew up in. Now our Chuck Taylor's eased carefully down the passage, feeling our way blind. Stepping on soft ... stuff. Pigeon feathers probably, or bird babies maybe? Could be. Great! (Everyone having fun?)

Something brushed against my legs and suddenly the door slammed shut behind us. Kenny grabbed the edge of my hoody with Reags stumbling smack into us. Me, I wasn't nervous. I knew what was coming. Although the wind was blowing up very random, aggro but also unsure, which kinda freaked me out.

I wondered where Kaye and Lauren were hiding. Behind the bar? Up in the gallery that overlooked the old theatre stage? Somewhere on the staircase, could be, but which side, cause it was a big, sweeping curve. Must have been pretty glam, in the day. Maybe they were waiting it out in that creepy back room which had cat footprints climbing the walls? Shit! And those triangular symbols sprayed in red! Okay, okay, calm down, whoosaaa... I mustn't psych myself out. I needed to get the new guys further in. Get them in nice and deep. Then lose them and grab myself a weapon.

We went on edgily, one after another, playing follow the leader like ice explorers roped together on a slippery ledge in the middle of a massive storm and your goggles are frosted over and your fingers are frozen, but frozen with dust this time, compliments of the plasterwork on either side of the passage. It felt gruesomely gritty, grating my fingertips into the feeling of flesh. On we went. Face first through spider webs, following the tight circle of light from my cell, until at the end of the walkway I stopped, backing up the boys. Slowly I shone the faint beam around, picking things out.

To the left was a long-ass bar where the ghosts, if they'd been around, would've had their wild parties, drinks flowing, the guy ghosts chatting up the girl ghosts, a girl ghost trying to decide which boy ghost would be the one. I felt my heart clench.

Above the bar was a sign, wedged between wall and counter. A big board with colourful chalked writing: 'Saturday ... Dec 978 ... 18's only ... DJ Jef...'

The boys snickered.

I said nothing. I was glad it was dark and they couldn't see my face.

The light found a shoe. Only one. A high cork wedgie that wouldn't have looked out of place even now. Then a tall, slender thing with a weird silver top. I looked closer: filled with stubs. Ashtray.

Nothing but time, and now us, had disturbed the scene after all these years.

Just then, something bolted down the passage, between our legs.

“What the fuck!” screamed Reags, springing off the floor.

And Kenny? He almost leapt onto my back as if I would nanny him like some baby. C'mon! I pushed him away but he reached out and gripped my hoody way tight. I was choking before I managed to yank it back.

“I'm not your love blanky!” I whispered. Which was so true, actually, because no ways I was planning to keep that boy safe.

“Ja, you guys. You'll wanna act like big ous but ya'll jumping for every scratch”.

“Please, who's bang here? It's only cats yoh. I'll smash those stupid cats if I just find one!” claimed Reags.

And then my battery died. And with that, the guys stopped dead.

“How Kim! Don't fuck round bra! What you mean it *died*?” asked Reags.

I said sorry, man, but nothing I could do. They didn't need to know I turned off the light.

“Let's rather vai then guys,” Kenny urged, reaching for my hoody again. But all he got was a handful of old air, because I was gone.

I'd slipped through the doorway and up the stairs. Put my light on again, spotting Lauren on the second flight toward the gallery. We caught up, and met Kaye at the top. She was already nicely squared with her paintball gear, and very soon, I knew, the shit was gonna fly. It was just a matter of waiting for the targets to fall in line, centre stage.

“Heyyy little boyyyyyyss...,” I whispered, and we stifled our laughter into silence while we waited.

Suddenly: the quiet was broken by shattering glass, accompanied by high-pitched screams from Kenny and Reags.

“Stop it guys! Where the fuck are you'll?” shouted Reags.

No one answered.

I knew the boys must be shitting themselves.

Then Lauren said, “Shsssh...” even though I wasn’t talking. “I heard something”.

“You losing your mind?” Kaye whispered back.

“No really. Be quiet. Listen.”

Silence.

“Hey guys, remember that one time G told us about the street people who rent a corner somewhere back here?” asked Kaye.

“Talk shit bra. Where’s this corner huh? How come I’ve never seen these people come and go?” I refused to believe her nonsense.

“Shhh!” demanded Lauren again. “Listen.”

Kaye whispered softer, “No really, weren’t you there when he told us? It’s a man and his girlfriend I think. He’s like seriously weird.”

Oh I was there alright! But at this dark moment in time I’d rather not talk about all this. Would be like bringing back the dead. And, it was a man and his mother actually. Deadbeat relations of Alice maybe. Unlikely. But why else would she let them rent, and for so long? And what do you pay for a room with no electricity, and no bathroom, these days? There were too many unanswered questions and in the creepy darkness my mind was too busy trying to answer them. G said the old woman never left the place, just stayed in with her cats. The son was once spotted skating really early, when the ice was still covered in cold mist, a white, thick, ghostly smoke.

I thought they’d gone a while back already. Well... apparently. Or maybe not. Just like no one actually saw them move in, maybe they never moved out? Maybe they even fucking *died* here. Or still lived here. Shit, which was worse?

Silence...

Then:

“There! That sound?”

We stood absolutely still.

I was beginning to get annoyed. I didn’t come here to get spooked you know. That wasn’t the plan.

“You go take a look,” Lauren said to me.

“N’ways, you mad if you think I wanna find the voices in your head!”

And then...then I did hear something. Small, at first. Scratching. Then louder, a freakish sound like nails on chalk, and it absolutely scraped the shivers right to the very top of my

spine, like I'd just won a free pass to my worst nightmare. Lauren must be mad. I certainly wasn't keen to find out what the sound was, but Lauren, she was insisting, pushing me ahead.

"Stop it man! In horror films it's always the forward people that die first. I still need to cash up, girl, I can't check out till I've sorted my float!"

I needed to joke. I had to. My mind had to remind my heart that the darkness was only temporary.

When we heard the sound again, that long, drawn out screeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeech that curdled our fear, we clutched at each other hard, almost stopping the blood flow. Oh shit oh shit ...

"It's coming from the bar! It's ... wait ..." – and the grimaced clawing came again, closer this time, "It's right here now, near the stairs!" We were crapping ourselves. So much for girl power!

And exactly then came this terrible creaking of some rusted door opening and a tall bent figure shuffled towards us, all dark and indistinct in the gloom.

"Hello kiddies", he drawled deeply, "Welcome! Lost something? Let me hel-"

And if we'd been dumbstruck before, us girls, now we screamed and screamed and then the boys came running from behind, also screaming, and in the chaos someone let fly with a water balloon and though Kaye had abandoned her gun, somehow paintballs were being fired completely mal *pock pock* into the dark, the dense air puckering with each shot. And the defenceless boys must have picked up any old shit off the floor to throw because I felt things on my face and a feather in my mouth and I'm spitting and someone's shoving me towards the door. Damn! We couldn't see who was who or what was what or who was that ... that creature who wanted to help us?

Everyone was soaked and bruised. Boys, girls, everyone was laughing and gasping as we stumbled through the little door back into the light of the world.

"Unca G!" we shouted, all of us together, loud as anything. "Where you, Uncle G?" He took his own sweet time, and when he saw us he shook his head very slowly and covered his mouth with his hand. Soon the smirk was a laugh, and then he was laughing so hard he was crying curly tears and I swear a single pigeon feather floated slowly down, settling right near his big bunch of keys.

Cane Train

Joe Cools. The balcony. Perfect watch-spot on a Sunday afternoon. Waves that foamed and flipped in the sun like missing dolphins. The warm ocean breeze that slowly narrowed the water to a glassy horizontal where pocket-sized container ships drew a border between what you knew and the distance where only courage dared to go.

The roof-top at Joe's reminded me of Miami, with that cool, beach party vibe. Sure, so I'd never been to Miami, right, but with all the reality TV shows there was virtually the whole world right in my lounge, and I'm telling you it didn't get more Florida than this.

I watched people parading on the promenade. Girls in short shorts, every colour. White boys in wetsuits half stripped, rinsing their six packs under yellow pipe showers. Three old Muslim men debating as they walked, solemn grey beards in formal clothes. A couple and their baby – a brindled pitbull puppy that pulled excitedly into the breeze. Strollers, bikes, families, loners ...

On the wind came a life guard announcement, chewing its own echo. "Whaall barhthrs oghl ... bartweng ...".

I sometimes wondered if those guys were warning swimmers or threatening the sharks, because there was no way people could understand a word they said.

A laidback day. As the sun set, Dj Niskerone and Pascal & Pearce kept up the beats, the bar in the centre of the wooden floor draped in neon, lights strung along the balmy roof thatch. As I said: full on Miami. Two for one cocktails meant the sound of ice crushing in the blender, Bacardi shot through with fruit juice in red, orange, even blue. Though the barmen were dressed in black, this party was far from formal and the house beats pumped through their sleek bodies like blood, causing a two step in their feet, a sway in their shoulders and a 'yeah man!' in their voices.

Iman and I managed to grab a table, sliding quickly onto the benches to stake our claim. She was amped for the evening, because she had Monday off, which meant her weekend wasn't even halfway over. Unlike some of us she didn't have to face a menopausal boss at 8am the next day, so now she could get down to business. Though there was still that

damn headache she needed to dissolve. Panado. Always did the trick, with a little something to wash it down. Her first order was two Castle lagers and two strawberry daiquiris – the girl wasn't wasting time.

I spotted David. Bright and breezy as ever, ready to keep us entertained. That guy! He starts chatting and doesn't stop. Seems he'd recently found salvation – or at least a fresh sense of purpose – selling secret socks and second-hand clothing. Faaaascinating stuff. I nodded. Mm mm. Looked at his regulation Mr Price vest and floral baggies. Shit, he'd never manage a real job, that one, so all the best his informal business was turning out well. Sell the silly socks, my man. Do what you hafta.

Iman was edgy. Even after a daiquiri she seemed to realise that the throbbing in her head was going nowhere slowly, so she went to the bar for a glass of water, something pure to wash down more of her stash. (White pills in her purse. Other colours too. A collection just one shade short of the Ghanaian flag.) A bit wobbly, she was, as she left the table, a pretty girl on the edge of a migraine.

But a few seconds later she returned in a different guise, an aspirant supermodel strutting her stuff and flashing a business card around and telling us about the man who'd offered to buy her a drink. Of course she'd told him she didn't do drinks from strangers, however handsome, and so he'd offered her a modelling contract instead. Seems these days minds are more easily changed than clothes.

“So you gonna take him up on it?” I asked.

“Why not? But I told him I'd think about it. Keep him guessing!”

He was a talent scout for a Milan agency, he said; this was a recruiting trip and Iman was a girl with perfect legs for the runway – *lithe* he'd said, that's the word he used, and Iman smirked all sexy for us. And not to mention these gorgeous almond eyes (she fluttered) and beautiful caramel skin (airbrushing her face with a hand).

Sounded like bullshit to me. Iman was getting ahead of herself. She should know by now that medication and alcohol aren't a match made in heaven. But I didn't say anything; I didn't want to be a bad friend, never mind a bitch.

Plus I understood why all this stuff caught her attention. She was lovely. Why shouldn't she be discovered, right here at home, even though it was Durban? A few years ago she'd actually been to modelling school for a while, though that had faded away, just like her soccer dream and the spice girl phase. Iman. She was always into something.

And now here she was, this fancy agent's card in her hand, prancing around like she's a big name. I watched her supermodel act and mulled things over. I guess some phases just go dormant, they're never completely over.

It's like the ice rink, I figured as Iman babbled on. After a session the melt gets magically reworked, the surface smoothed over and hardened. The entire mess refreezes. It looks completely new again, though everything from before remains part of the ice forever. It hasn't really gone, you know that; you just can't see where it is. But it's there, I'm certain. Underneath or somewhere. Mixed in the melt and re-iced. Who's to say the old stuff doesn't become the new sleek surface, reflecting like a mirror? By the time the men had finished with the machines, planing the ice all smooth, anything was possible. Anyone could start over. Assuming you knew how to stand. Stick to the sides, at first, take it easy. Then slowly you get moving.

Iman was saying how she planned to call the guy first thing in the morning and who knows where she could be the following Sunday. On Fashion TV maybe, she said, why not? Who knew how models became models? Only Tyra Banks or someone. Maybe this was how girls made it, collected at the tail end of small time events all over the world, pretty girls swept up and swept away, never to be seen again except larger than life. Hair made peroxide blonde, eyes taught how to smile, eyebrows only sometimes.

I was never destined for this kind of stuff. Anyway, I heard wearing high heels all the time gives you varicose veins. Which are old time ugly.

But still I thought about these girls, collected high above the rest of us. Special. Like the shiny five rand with Nelson Mandela's face that I'd swap out the Cashbox register right before cashing up, building up a pretty stash of my own. I like his face. And I like to think the coins might be worth something one day.

Around six or so, the dark starts falling down like everyone else, and we follow the party train led by the music downstairs and inside, where the Dj's are getting set up for the night-time jorl.

Iman and I fell in with the crowd, letting the music and the cane trains take us full steam ahead, pumping on. Dancing. Drinking. You ever seen a caterer's bucket of ginger and garlic? *Big* right? How many litres would you say it holds? Yeah, well at Joe's, drinks were supersized; we may as well have been drinking out one of those.

It was comforting for me, the size. Made me believe in endless possibility. So I was happy, clutching a bucket brimming with cane, cream soda, and ice cubes; childhood, the present, the future, everything all mixed up. I held that bucket tight to my chest with the black straw like an exotic smoke dangling in my mouth, enjoying the bliss. A bucket is something to hold close, even though it gives you more trips to the Ladies than anything else.

Where was I? Was it my second bucket? My third? Shit knows, I was just happy to sip away, drowning in a pleasantly absent feeling. And after every bucket the beat hit me deeper, closer, and by the middle of the night Joe's was packed with people and insane energy, sparking and fluctuating.

Out of nowhere up popped this tiny Asian woman in tight red pants and a flowery top. Totally buzzing. She just grabbed David towards her, pulling at his belt with one hand and gripping his fingers with the other. "Dance, dance!"

He grinned at us, and shrugged. Whatever ... he wasn't objecting. Soon, in the flashing lights his eyes glowed all colours, and his body seemed to crackle with static as the woman began to grind her ass against him to the sound of Pitbull. "Bring it on lady!" someone screeched.

'We at the Hotel,

Motel,

Holiday Inn...

Now gimme that sweet, that nasty Gucci stuff,

Let me tell you what we gon' do

Two plus two

I'm gonna undress you'

Soon the crowd was cheering them on from all sides, masses of wild hands banging the air. Miss Hong Kong even knew the words to the song, music being an international language, I suppose.

I was cheering too, one hand in the air and one hand holding my cellphone. Just in case we made it a night to forget, someone had to remember. Take a few photos. Maybe a video. Let everyone see.

I was standing – wobbling – on a chair, snapping photos from any angle as Iman got in the mix and sandwiched Miss Hong Kong with David. All to the rhythm of Bingo Players:

I know
I'm
Caught up in the middle.
I cry just a little
When I think of letting go...'

And when the three of them finally separated the Chinese chick pulled them back, determined to stick tight to Iman, who would entertain almost anything after three cane trains. Then again, I suppose, show me someone who wouldn't, given the chance.

No one's ever come on to me that way. Never. But I always say I'd have none of it; what would people think of me?

And all the time I was struggling to hold my arm still so the photos wouldn't be blurred. There was this rapid movement swirling the room between lights people hands fist-pumping fingers pointing arms stretching swinging downing at the bar. The music was like a whirlpool swirling between the bodies, drawing me in.

Then I noticed a man who stood alone, and still, just below me to the right. A fixed point for my frenzied head. Quiet, and quite self-contained in black formal pants and a smart white shirt. Sleek, dark hair. Perspiration made his pale skin glitter, but the more I stared at him the more attractive he became. A bit old for this crowd but hey, different strokes for different folks, I always say, and I needed a little stroking. He was focused intently. On what...I couldn't see, but he seemed to have forgotten about the drink in his hand. Nursing it as opposed to drinking it I thought as I sipped more cane juice.

Curious, I stretched my balance even further on my chair, one sightless hand periscoping the air, recording the crowd, while the rest of me tried to look at his eyes, *into* them, dark and still amid all the visual noise. Intimate and mysterious. So sexy that I unbalanced and almost fell off the chair into his arms. But this Sir was a gentleman, and sober, and his reflexes were quick as he pushed against my leg to save me from a complete collapse.

Then without even letting me thank him – I was hoping to strike up a conversation, at least – the handsome stranger walked away, leaving me to deal with my epic fail. Talk about harsh. Which was reason enough for me to drown my sorrows further, I figured, as I joined the queue for another round. That's how it is with cane trains. They just keep on coming, chugging down the night. So blame it all on the alcohol I thought. Yeah that's it.

No sooner was I clutching another cold green companion than Iman hijacked my other arm, dragging me off to the toilet. She never could go alone. Place spooked her, or something. The germs or whatever. Cautiously, she peeked inside each cubicle.

“What you want?” I joked, “You looking for love?”

“Fuck that. I’m searching for the impossible.”

But there was no toilet roll anywhere, only girls and more girls, in all forms of ‘messed up.’ Girls tumbled in and out, checking their lip gloss in the mirrors, tossing their hair or wetting it flat, saving that fake eyelash from falling, shouting loudly for their friends in the closed stalls. Some were taking photos for instant uploads on who knows which social network.

I heard someone throw up. A serious hurl followed by the bruising, deep-throated flush of liquid to liquid. Disgusting and lengthy. A door opened and Miss Hong Kong stepped onto the runway over the splatter, looking wired as ever.

“Guess she’s not used to our version of firewater,” Iman laughed as the woman stumbled to the sink, dribbled her hands with water, and lurched to the right.

“Either that, or me and Dave are too much for her to handle!”

But I wasn’t really listening. Watching as the Tiny Chinee walked out and turned right. Now I wasn’t exactly sharp at this point, all things considered; my reactions were probably on a five second delay. But I was still pretty sure of the way out. That I could do in my sleep. So naturally I stuck my head around the corner to see where the lovely lotus lady had gone. And pulled back just as fast.

“Iman!” I got her attention with my flapping hand. I pointed. The woman was chatting in the dark passage with Mr Tall Pale and Handsome, sweet and pretty as you please. A bit too close for comfort, I noticed. Him. With *her*? What the fuck?

“That’s the same ou, bra!” Iman whispered, sizing me up like I was drunk or something.

“Huh?”

“Ay fuck man, *listen* to me! *That* ou! He’s the same one.”

“As who?”

“The dude that wannadah buy me a drink. The modelling guy. It’s him!”

“Are you for real?”

“Ja-aa, how!”

No way, my heart whined. Trust Iman. Forever Iman. Always *Iman*.

“Ey, how come you always hit right. He’s hot!”

“Ja! I got his number,” she boasted, finger pointing to her chest. “Now you forget him. Let’s go dance!”

Yet even as I danced, the whole thing bugged me. Iman was great looking, always noticed better than me when we were out and about. Like honey for the guys, that rich smooth kind. Creamy. Such delicate skin.

But me, I was more the unprocessed stuff. What you call it...? Raw. Hard to manage. And with an attitude like a bee sting. Ey, *horrible*. Sometimes I was too defensive with the opposite sex. Always pushing them away like I got stung.

Once when I was small my aunt got my mother a bottle of natural raw honey. Ma opened the paper and looked.

“Is this even edible?”

And then my aunt explained, “Of *course*. And I hear it’s good for cuts and burns. Good anti-bacterial. Natural.”

No way I ever believe that. Even today. Dettol works just fine; faster and better. Plus you know where it comes from, don’t you. You can buy it proper off the shelf. Don’t go wasting your time with wax and hives and what all.

But now there’s Miss Hong Kong too, that little honey oozing into the picture. Confusing me.

I felt angry at Joe Cools. Everything was against me. I tried so hard to be nice, didn’t I? To be sweet. But I was tired of getting left. Does anyone ever get what she deserves? I wondered, totally stumped for an answer.

I found myself looking out for that woman inside, Miss Fortune Cookie or what, thinking how come a hot guy like that, a modelling agent even, how's he talking to some short Asian female in a dark corner. In a hot club. You tell me. Don't get me wrong, but I mean this one was *short* hey, so like very far from the heights of any real model I'd ever seen. Plus, come to think of it, Handsome and Shorty seemed to know each other quite well.

My brain was drowning.

After a while of dancing like I never heard those same old songs before, I needed a break. I needed to *breathe*, so I handed my latest cane train to Iman, kissing it bye bye, knowing full on I had no hope of getting it back, and out I went to join David on the balcony.

Out there, even with a smoke, I felt lonely. Very drunk. I'd reached that stage, you know, when you've given up. You don't give a shit what your hair looks like, your make up. All you wanna do is call your ex from back in high school and tell him how much you miss him so maybe he could come over for old times'. You just want ... well, you know.

For a long time, I looked up at the sky, searching for stars. I saw the bright lights flashing on the hotels, the smaller, uncertain glimmer of ships waiting at anchor. Lost myself in the black, waveless water before I turned my back.

Back inside, I still needed time out, so I sat alongside the dance floor bopping my head a bit to the beat, trying to smile as I watched everybody else having a great old time.

Iman and David were really happening. They were cranking it out all over the dance floor, making new dance partners with every few moves. And then across the room, in the busy darkness, again that stillness caught my eye.

The model agent hot shot superman was steeped in the sober shadows and surveying the scene, probably nursing the exact same drink. I stared. He stared back, unmoving. Not even a blink. He would not look away. Me neither.

Gradually his stillness started to give me the creeps. He was cold, blank, as if determined to absorb everything – energy, curiosity, all feeling sucked into a bottomless black hole. The kind you used to get in stories, you know, when your mother still read to you at night. And at the same time I'm thinking hold on, ease up on the suspicion, girl, it's the cane trains at work, sending you on a fast track to paranoia. When *snap!* in the pulse of a strobe he disappears and Miss Hong Kong pops up again like she's his freaky substitute, a body double or something, as lively as he is remote, grinding away on the dance floor in manic bursts. My mind is freaking out.

This time it's David Guetta bursting out the speakers.

'Without you, without...you!

Oh oh oh

You you you

without

you you you

Without you'

... and the crowd is peaking, everybody jumping up and down so hyper for a moment it could have been the exact music video except we weren't in Brazil, only Durban, which despite its moments is not exactly big news. But next thing Miss Hong Kong is back like she never went away and she's grinding her tiny groove over to Iman again like she's 'sha shabba ranks' while David's the other side booty shaking with some black babe.

I don't know what sort of tight spring roll action the Chinese was aiming to pull, but soon she was body-locked around Iman, like noodle-wrapped, hump-jumping the two of them together from side-to-side, side-to-side, until Iman looked totally whacked. Wrecked. Her eyelids kept closing slow motion then popping open sharp like someone stuck her deep with a pin. She seemed very dizzy, doozo actually, and was trying weakly to wiggle free in the direction of outside and fresh air, but as she lolled towards the balcony the Chinese woman, still hopping about, she grabs Iman's hand and pulls her towards the door.

Which never mind crouching tigers and what, that's not an easy move. There's a clumsy tussle, Iman pulling back, Miss Ching-Chong gripping Iman's shoulder and hauling towards the exit like she's dragon dancing, then Iman stumbles and the woman's thrown off balance but at once springs up like some kung fu that just won't die and shit! Oh *shit!* she's yanked my brah out the door and into the dark parking lot.

At which point, despite my extensive liquid diet, I'm off the chair snap! like that! running for David, then through the crowd towards the exit, screaming "Iman! Iman!"

Dave's already down the stairs, where Iman (passed out), is being dragged through the car park by Chop Suey.

Dave grabs the Chinese woman's arm, shouting. But the ninja's on fire and in one jerk she's free, Iman falling knees-first to the ground like she's been shot in the head and on top of that she's nearly slammed by the car that pulls up, the passenger door flying open. In a split

second, the car's smoke. Handsome and Crouching Tiger have vanished, and it's only the three of us left high and dry, lost and local.

Shaking, I held Iman in my arms. Protecting her. But also using her, too, shielding myself against the disappearing sight of the driver with his pale skin and sleek, dark hair. I blinked twice, unable to fathom the yellow foreign license plate. Breathing heavily, I watched David running crazy behind the car, holding a brick he never threw.

What a night. I wasn't stupid. Any fool could know from the papers that Durban was an important harbour city, a major import-export hub which just happened to be a half-way point to almost everywhere. And all those stacked containers, what was in there, huh, pirated electronics? Lacoste clothing with fat alligators on them? Fresh tinned food with labels only a scientist could decipher? Who knew. People would buy and sell anything other people wanted.

That business with Iman, I was thinking, did it really just happen? And what was it, exactly, that almost went down?

But even before the cold light of day helped me to think things through, I did wonder, that night. Whether by next Sunday or maybe the one after, Iman might have been miles away from anywhere, far from where her people could find her and certainly much more than arm's length from any fashion runway.

And so for a few crazy seconds then, in the car park at the back of the club, the smell of exhaust fumes assaulting my throat, David panting and swearing simultaneously, the chunk of concrete dead in his hand, Iman lolling against me almost stone cold, her face glazed in a druggy stupor, I did picture it. The other ending.

I saw my beautiful friend on show. Being auctioned off in tiny black lace underwear while bidders, droll and urbane, sampled exotic snacks. Black fish eggs and the like. Presiding: a subtle gentleman with sleek, dark hair, looking on from his distance corner. Quiet and quite self-contained in his black formal pants and smart white shirt. His pale hand calling her over. Later still, in the sheltered wings of the private suite, with one hand a chubby oriental midget offered a cool, frosted glass of something red on a silvered tray. With the other, the epitome of discretion, he held back the heavy velvet curtain just enough so that I could see.

A brief critical essay on the writing process

You ask if I thought my fiction had changed anything in the culture and the answer is no. Sure, there's been some scandal, but people are scandalized all the time; it's a way of life for them. It doesn't mean a thing. If you ask if I want my fiction to change anything in the culture, the answer is still no. What I want is to possess my readers while they are reading my book — if I can, to possess them in ways that other writers don't. Then let them return, just as they were, to a world where everybody else is working to change, persuade, tempt, and control them. The best readers come to fiction to be free of all that noise, to have set loose in them the consciousness that's otherwise conditioned and hemmed in by all that isn't fiction.

-Philip Roth, *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959)

In “A Case of Story: Coetzee, Gordimer, Bosman ... !” Michael Chapman reminds us that “story is everywhere” (2004: 6), and can be found all around us. Whether in newspapers, magazines, our imaginations, or even in the form of a joke, stories are often experiences developing around significant events of the time. Chapman goes further to suggest that a story is frequently an “expression of the self in society” (2004:7): an expression arising from the question of relational subjectivity in a country about to reach its twentieth year of democracy. Such an assessment holds a significant truth for my own writing of short stories, since the project emerges from personal experience of the North Beach area as an adolescent. Story was certainly everywhere, gleaned from conversation and overheard snippets, from chance encounters with strangers or long-term friendships and the cultural-political happenings of the time.

In particular, my collection revolves around pockets of urban youth culture in the North Beach area, addressing the questing search for a sense of belonging in community, and by extension, in society. This reveals itself especially among ‘the Rinkrats,’ a group of young individuals whose lives, voices and characters recur throughout the collection. In addition to the urban culture I experienced at The Durban Ice Rink, the lesson of ‘write what you know’, which I encountered in one of my first creative writing experiences at tertiary level, influenced my undertaking to attempt such a collection. As will become clear and justified in this brief essay, my stories are based on an empirical knowledge of daily life in and around Durban’s North Beach: a shifting, marginalised locality and cultural grouping. In particular, I draw on the experience of working at the ice rink, a position which brought me into close encounter with the area’s population, at once mobile and regular. During this experience, I witnessed the constant movement and interchange of the public clientele of the ice rink between five two-hour sessions each day. As a result, I was able to make brief, generally curtailed observations of people’s lives, to speculate quite open-endedly about their

circumstances. To my mind, this did not lend itself well to the more conventionally linear and experientially coherent form of a novel. Instead, the short story genre offered me the opportunity to capture and convey more episodic portrayals of life. It therefore proved apt. Also, as a dynamic genre, whose mobility I will discuss later in this essay, short stories accommodated my desire to allow my writing to venture beyond the space of the ice rink and to engage with a wider urban space, fragments of which inform the writing and cut across, again and again, the more central locale of the rink. (Concerning verisimilitude: it will emerge that in my treatment of character's lives I have also freely invented and innovated, allowing the documented fact of the location and of real people to function more as inspirational markers than as verifiable data banks. In other words, even 'write what you know' necessarily entails moving beyond the known; write what you *don't know* about what you know, some creative writing scholars are beginning to suggest, acknowledging the gap which exists between merely recounting events and the creative shaping of writing into work which has power and affect. I believe I have managed to accomplish this, relying not merely on 'how it was', but also inflecting the stories through symbolic patternings, motifs and the like, such that story intensity is heightened.)

In effect, in writing the stories I aim to offer a representation of place and people who have not previously featured as subjects in the South African literary landscape. While the reason for this lack of representation remains unclear (simply a lack of writers interested in this specific regionality and even subcultural grouping?), I hope to represent the area of North Beach as a living and shifting space, comprising much more than the warm beach and "sunsational" atmosphere which is touted in the city's current tourism campaign, launched in 2011 and presently still in operation (Ngcongco 2011). Relevant here are Sue Marais's remarks on the "intrinsically ambivalent or hybrid character of the short fiction cycle", which

has enabled the genre to encapsulate two mutually contrasting responses to the South African predicament and the dilemma of a South African identity. The first of these comprises a defiant attempt to assert the bonds of affinity and to depict unified subjects defined in and by their communities...whilst the second denotes the opposite by emphasising the divisions between and within communities, and the concomitant sense of personal culpability, of dislocation and of psychic fragmentation in individual consciousness. (1995: 31)

It is such tensions which the stories in *Ice Core* undertake to explore.

Why short stories?

Chapman (2004) explains that short stories in South Africa have proven a popular genre with reliable, even guaranteed readerships, yet they have frequently been overlooked by literary scholars. He suggests that this may be due to a lack of theory and definition of the form, which itself seems to relegate stories to the margins of interest. If anything, readers favour the form for its versatile nature: a nature they can relate to due to their own efforts in constantly seeking adaptation in a now mobile and new South African society. Unfastened from its apartheid burden, today's society is no longer ordered, at a social level, entirely by hegemonic politics. Instead, individual experiences and interactions have come to the fore, with the post-apartheid era seeing a rise in the articulating of diverse, previously unheard stories and voices. The short story is well-suited to such a range of expression, since it is stylistically diverse, and able to morph according to different registers, both high and low. Chapman, for his part, has championed short stories in the South African context through articles, essays and edited anthologies such as *The New Century of South African Short Stories* (2004) as well as context-specific investigations of the form such as *The 'Drum' Decade: Stories from the 1950s* (1989). The latter offers an insightful and critically influential commentary on the blurred boundaries between fiction and journalism, which has helped me to appreciate that the literary imagination can take account of ordinary expression and 'found' forms such as conversations which work to defamiliarise reader expectations of

what supposedly comprises a ‘proper’ story. However, I do not maintain that I explore such opportunities with much experimental energy in my own collection. Yet Chapman’s approach to the short story as a discursively flexible form which is capable of responding to varied collective and personal claims has assisted me in shaping the idea of the collection *Ice Core* as centred on quotidian place and community, environments which produce distinctive character voicing and identity.

The Short Story Cycle

Sue Marais, if less prolific in her scholarship on short fiction, is another South African academic who has attempted to expand theories of the short story genre in relation to the possibilities and constraints of regional place. She is especially interesting on the question of the ‘short story cycle’ (1992), which she discusses in regard to South African authors such as Ivan Vladislavić and Zoë Wicomb. Marais discusses Vladislavić’s *Missing Persons* (1989) and Wicomb’s *You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town* (1987) as short story cycles which maintain internal linking devices that reinforce a strong sense of place, thus providing cohesion in collections that depart from traditional conventions of the short story form. However, before outlining any further characteristics of the short story cycle it is important to understand something about the traditional elements of a short story and how the genre has changed over time, thus calling for recognition of a more cyclic pattern in modern day collections.

Marais (2005) explains that short stories have existed since ancient mythical times. The genre could possibly find its roots in oral folk-tale, considering both are usually short enough to be received in one sitting. In the very beginning of his article, James Cooper Lawrence (1917) reminds us of the basis on which a short story is formed. He draws us back to Edgar Allan Poe (1842), who, in his review of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Twice-told Tales* (1837), states that

the ordinary novel is objective from its length, for reasons already stated in substance. As it cannot be read at one sitting it deprives itself, of course, of the immense force derivable from *totality* During the hour of perusal the soul of the reader is at the writer's control. There are no external or extrinsic influences resulting from weariness or interruption. (Lawrence 1917:274)

The implication seems to be, therefore, that in its essence a short story, irrespective of whether it is one page or ten pages in length, should still manage to convey a sense of intrigue and heightened tension that control what, according to Poe (1842), is “the soul of the reader” in a single sitting. This ‘soul’ can be understood as the reader’s emotional and cognitive investment that a short story, if but only for a brief moment, can awaken. Clearly, the presence of a readership for short stories is also vital to the form, just as an audience is important in oral tradition (Davis 2001). It is in the success of a readership’s relation to the story, or the lack thereof, that a further understanding of the form can be gained, as well as how the genre can be received by the reading public. (I wonder, here, whether the relatively small Durban reading audience has somehow contributed to the lack of focus on the areas of the city which intrigue me – there has seemed little reason to write such stories because there is little likelihood of their being read Additionally, I somehow suspect that literary studies, however much it has shifted in the last twenty years, still has some way to go before giving due attention to the low cultural formations and experiences of marginalised people in a small-town provincial city. If you are Ronnie Govender, perhaps, writing of the lost cultural practices and peoples associated with apartheid’s effacing of Cato Manor – well, perhaps then. But if you are interested in contemporary young people, in the messiness and ostensible banality of youth culture – a cultural scene disrespectful of received cultural capital, where are your readers then? Perhaps they are there, waiting. Waiting for some writer to do for North Beach what others have done for Sophiatown, or Hillbrow, or Cape Town.)

In terms of the short story genre's development over time, Ian Reid (1977) notes a movement in literature around the Middle Ages, during which the creation of short story collections, comprising stories previously circulated independently, began to grow in popularity. However, according to Reid, it is important to note that at this stage in the development of the short story genre, collections that emerged were merely combined for the sake of creating a miscellaneous grouping of work. While some narratives were worthwhile, for the most part the internal structure of the collection proved to be poor. Over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, short story collections evolved from a predominant focus on romance to concentrating on the realism associated with the tales of the time. It was only by the twentieth century that a contemporary short story cycle emerged, one which Forrest L. Ingram terms a "unique literary genre" (1971: 203).

In *Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century* (1971), Ingram defines a story cycle as "a book of short stories so linked to each other by their author that the reader's successive experience on various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modifies his experience of each of its component parts" (19). Cycles today have certainly progressed from their early "external" methods of organisation to a preferred "internal" linking which is vital to their structure and unity (Reid 1977:46). This helps to generate the coherent 'experience' and 'pattern' which according to Ingram a collection should ideally provide a reader. To my mind, a significant element of this 'experience' derives from the sense of realism which readers gain upon imaginatively situating themselves within the stories of any given collection. This realism is, of course, also subject to imaginative heightening, in that the external empirical world becomes subject to the internal logics of author's story world, such that pattern, images, descriptions, registers and the like are used to strengthen the overall experiential logic of the collection, repetition and rhythmic outlining contributing to impact. Here, elements such as tone and motif, in addition to the recurrence of one or more

characters, assists in reinforcing a credible impression of a “common fictionalised setting” (Marais 1992:42).

During my writing process I was influenced by other writers, whose work aided my understanding of concepts such as ‘experience’ and ‘pattern’ and how they work in practice. In particular, I am thinking of Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* (1991) and Karen Russell’s *St. Lucy’s Home for Girls Raised by Wolves* (2006). Both books include recurrent yet identifiable patterns which reinforce a sense of realism even while simultaneously opening up the narrative frame to impressionistic, symbolic resonance. The stories are linked to each other via the motif of childhood. Cisneros’s stories (in her case, they are envisaged to comprise a novel) are woven together by the ethnic threads of a Hispanic American community, and especially address female coming-of-age. Karen Russell’s collection draws its quirky, oddball energies from the unstable locale of the Florida Everglades, shifting from realism to stranger modes in order to capture the bizarre nature of childhood and adolescence, combining world-weary adult insight with highly original takes on the impossibilities of being young in the contemporary world.

The Place of Water...

Since the stories in my collection derive their originating impetus from a diverse community emplaced on or close to the Durban beachfront, and with the Durban Ice Rink serving as a key setting for several stories in the collection, it is no coincidence that the overall linking motif in *Ice Core* is water in all three states. Throughout the collection water is present in the stories whether on a major or minor scale. In some cases, more than one phase of water can be found in a single story, as in “Cane Train”, where the varied states which water may take are present in the form of ‘waves’, ‘the warm ocean breeze’, and ‘ice crushing’. The point, here, is to underscore the paradoxical fluidity and fixity of both place and identity in this

narrow slice of Durban life. While the North Beach area might only constitute a small, fixed, geographical co-ordinate of the city of Durban, it is still constantly able to change shape, and therefore appear, fictionally, as a larger, more amorphous, even unrestrained, part of the living city. All the descriptions of setting found within the collection contribute to the creation of a vivid region within which a reader can imaginatively locate her- or himself. Pertinent in this regard is Chapman's (2004) reminder of Flannery O'Connor's (1968) notion that the very placement of an audience in the middle of an action comprises the "extra dimension" of a short story (98). Short stories invite readers into an apparent realism and ask that they imagine themselves as part of the place that the author has re-imagined, albeit using material geographical features (Abrahams 1981:10). The short story genre therefore calls for an immediate involvement with the communities and tensions located within the text. It is this 'extra dimension', this quick submergence of imagination and instant call for response from a reader, that distinguishes the short story cycle from other forms of writing, including oral tradition. (Oral tradition, it has been said, denies one the quiet conceptualisation of imaginative communities.) This critical essay will go on to expand on how my collection of stories, *Ice Core*, can be located within the short story cycle, how place develops as the central character of the collection, and how the mobility within this place lends itself to the short story cycle as a literary form that is flexible and in motion.

***Ice Core* as a short story cycle**

I have to admit that I struggled with a title. I envisaged the working title as *Stories on Ice*. Here, I hoped to imply a number of interlinked motifs or ideas. Firstly, the locational specificity of the collection – the ice rink as a place which functions in the collection as a conceptual centre, a site around which the characters' lives circle, turn and re-turn. Secondly, I also thought that 'stories on ice' might invoke the youthful culture of several stories, in

which drinking, partying and the high life form key activities. Thirdly, I hoped the title would work to convey the sense of trapped ennui which characterises Kim's life, for example, her frustrated sense that she is not able to move forward, but is living a repetitive banality, working in The Cashbox, and almost frozen in time. How can she develop, in this narrow context? What future can she even begin to imagine? Perhaps I thought that the ice might break, that Kim might experience an epiphanic break through or, even, that such 'breaking' might be the end of her, since she might 'drown', going under in the paradoxically shallow pond of her life. *Stories on Ice*. For a while, I remained with this title. However, something inexplicable began to shift, and I grew less satisfied.

Through research into the connotative meanings of 'ice', creative investigations into how ice features in discipline-specific jargons and vocabularies, I arrived at a new title: *Ice Core*. This title is pleasingly unexpected, even disconcerting, in that the stories introduce a reader to a part of Durban well known for its subtropical beaches and the associated mélange of people, both drifting and resident. There are locals who live in the cluster of retro hi-rises that stand along the 'Golden Mile' and are also set further back in secondary streets and run-down alleys. Such flats are interspersed with hotels and holiday accommodation, brand-name fast food restaurants, down-home chip joints and run-of-the mill Spar outlets. It is an intriguing mix of old and new styles, revamped consumer locations and crumbling decrepitude. Similarly, the mix of people is interesting, bringing youthful (sub)cultures such as skateboarding and clubbing into sometimes discomfiting contact with older traditions and family values. Often, people come to the North Beach area from other parts of the city, for an hour or two, a day. They enjoy their leisure, and then they leave. Then there are newer, more occluded populations, undocumented migrants for whom the sea is a warm place to wash, the sand a site of small income ...

Such a mixed population of regulars and more transient people, including the blurred boundaries of culture and architecture, seemed aptly suited to the new title. This title finds its origin in an ‘ice core’, the sample of ice removed by drilling deep in to glaciers or ice sheets (Koffman 2011). Cores comprise striated layers of ice accumulated over long periods of time, sometimes millions of years. They are extracted for scientific study as they contain a vast amount of information on issues such as the geographical formation of land masses and climate change, both of which are important in understanding the nature of an environment and how it changes over time.

If I may be permitted a brief aside in this critical reflection on the writing process of my collection: at the back of my mind, perhaps, in searching for ways in which to work with locality, was the work of renowned Durban writer and marine bacteriologist Douglas Livingstone, especially his collection *A Littoral Zone* (1991). While he was a writer of poetry rather than fiction, and while I cannot presently address either his craft or his ideas in any detail, it is worth mentioning his final collection because it so acutely embodies the sense of a writerly imagination seeking to engage with the multiple, confusing specifics of the space – meaning the *place* and *times* – in which he lived. His poems move along the coastline, stopping at various ‘testing stations’ which become small sites where the poet-scientist is able to ‘sample’, to explore events, emotions, encounters with people and other life forms. My own interests in *Ice Core* are certainly not ‘scientific’ in any conventional sense, but my aesthetic and artistic curiosity is aroused, in ways similar to Livingstone’s, by the ‘lives’ which North Beach and its environs are able to sustain. Of course I do not intend to reduce the human subjects of the stories to abstracted ‘case studies’ or ‘microscopic’ histologies. At the same time, however, it is valid to imagine the stories in *Ice Core* constituting almost a local ecology, a relational series of experiences, characters and situations which gives rise to

an expansive, if never a comprehensive, sense of the North Beach ice rink environs as a vital, living place. I try to bring the area alive in my writing.

If an ice core, for the geologist, represents a significant extraction of information about times past, so too does my own collection of short stories serve as a focused, deep engagement with personal history in relation to place. While experiences and people are fictionalised in my own account of the North Beach community, my interest clearly does not lie in any scientific accuracy but in emotional and imaginative intensities which, in their own way, attest to a sense of *felt* truthfulness. Yet even the scientist, as I understand it, develops hypotheses and projections. Similarly, the story writer may seek to experiment with character, voice, and idea, by setting them within a controlled, deliberately delineated space. Such a treatment may contribute immensely to heightened mood, or atmosphere, for example. It may also enable a writer to explore the changes such ‘pressures’ and ‘forces’ may effect upon both character development and plot possibilities.

The title *Ice Core* implies that North Beach, even though often hot and humid, serves as the ice core of Durban mainly because The Durban Ice Rink forms the foundation of this core (collection). The first story in the cycle “Races at the Rink” lays a firm foundation of ice, and local community who interact in and around it. Other stories based at the Durban Ice Rink are also placed spatially apart in the collection, thereby always drawing the reader back to a central point, allowing the rink to become the centripetal force in the story cycle. This spatial arrangement is characteristic of the short story cycle which moves away from traditional linear narratives comprised unsparingly of a beginning, a middle, and an end. In *Ice Core*, such an arrangement continuously reinforces the title, in addition to water as motif, almost inscribing arcs, scoring circular patterns, such as those which occur when the blades of skates mark the ice. A palimpsest occurs, too, which is symbolic of the ice rink and

emphasised by the narrator in “Cane Train”: “After a session the melt gets magically reworked, the surface smoothed over and hardened. The entire mess re-freezes. It looks completely new again, through everything from before remains part of the ice forever. It hasn’t really gone, you know that; you just can’t see where it is”. In the same way, many feet make such marks, as it were writing over, overwriting, writing over and over, such that ice evolves as a space, and stories accumulate within the collection. Thus multiple meanings are in the process of being made, just as in and around North Beach, lives are being lived, lives are ongoing. The contradiction, for the ice, is that by the next session, once the ice has been cleaned, there is no trace of what has gone before, whether we wish to see these as highly individuated movements, or as (invisible) recurrent marks of a collective action.

While the imagery of underlining layers of ice lends itself comfortably to the fashion in which the North Beach community develops, other cores can also be extracted from this area and, unlike *Ice Core*, they do not necessarily have to incorporate characteristics of water and youth culture. This area of Durban is available for expansive fictional exploration. *Ice Core*, however, serves as a sort of time capsule of the *old* Durban Ice Rink as all stories are set in a time before the rink was purchased from the council by the private sector. This sense of time is often recognisable in the musical lyrics found in stories such as “Cane Train” and “Late Skate”. The hype created around the music, as well as indications of old street names like “Brickhill Road” and “Somtseu Road”, allows for an underlying time frame to reveal itself, meaning that whatever the youthful energy of the stories this is also offset against an archival impulse in which I attempt to re-store, indeed to restory, elements of a previously unrepresented past. Also, just as ice cores are separated in to different parts for analysis so can each story in the collection maintain its individuality – yet another important characteristic of the short story cycle. This is explained by Davis (2001), who states that a balance is necessary between the individuality of each story in a short story cycle and the

necessity towards coherence of the overall collection. The characters and places found in *Ice Core* remain diverse thereby allowing each story to maintain its individuality while still allowing shaping motifs to function as important linking components throughout the collection.

I will continue with a comparison of two stories from my collection, “Short Cuts” and “Two.Fr/agile”, for the purpose of identifying individual and unifying characteristics in both. Through this comparison I aim to emphasise the story cycle as an experimental form which allows writers to seize fragments of time and space and to re-configure them in any order they desire. However, writing within the cycle form also entrusts a writer with the responsibility of ensuring a reader can, according to Karen C. Cox (1998), identify a “pattern of nerves” pulsating throughout the collection. It should not pose much difficulty for a reader to locate repetitive elements, however subtle or pronounced, that serve to unify independent stories even though their physical arrangement in the collection might exhibit radical shifts in time and space.

With this in mind, let me discuss the two stories. “Short Cuts”, for example, is narrated by Brown, a mature gent who owns his own barbershop. Brown has tried his best to guide his nephew through life, and he also grieves the loss of many people, places and practices which have passed away, and which he often recalls, almost by involuntary memory. This story uses flashback as a device to affirm the historical background of the narrator. It also includes a variety of dialogue, often colloquial, which aims to institute distinction among the individuals found in and around the space of a barbershop. The story places intergenerational tension at its fore, enabling a reader slowly to understand how Wade, the nephew, is being drawn into a dicey sub-culture that will, unless he changes his actions, short cut his life. Brown, for his part, dapper and snazzy, caring and careful, is left to wield

his razor to shave the boy's head, aiding - against his own better instincts - in easing the boy's dangerous passage into cool gang culture.

In the case of "Two.Fr/agile", the plot revolves around a figure skater who is observed over time by the narrator at The Durban Ice Rink. The story is fragmented into two foci: i) the narrator's memory of an 'egg-lady' sculpture that she made and cherished as a child, and ii) the narrator's observations about the delicately girlish figure skater whom she watches at the rink. The structure invites readers to appreciate, through a dissociated flashback at the beginning of the story, the fragile connections between these two disjunct elements.

It is important to note that the use of language in these two stories is vastly different; meaning that I, as writer, have sought to hone distinctive idioms and vocal styles for different characters, even while aiming for recognisable consistency in the voice of the primary narrator, being the character Kim. In "Short Cuts", there is substantial colloquial language and local street slang; in "Two.Fr/agile" the register is more quietly reflective, the observations emerging as if from within the narrator's musing consciousness. While we see both stories employing devices such as flashbacks and youth as a common theme, they also depart from one another in relying on different styles of diction and foci. "Short Cuts" allows a reader to follow, through the communal proxy of the barber shop, the journey of a young boy who seeks to find new forms of community and belonging in an increasingly violent, gang-run part of 'the new South Africa'. "Two.Fr/agile", for the most part, more obliquely provokes a reader to affiliate the young figure skater within similar sub-cultural edginess, the child subtly being emptied of childhood and absorbed into darker shadows, her delicacy always under threat of being broken. Both stories explore themes of adolescence and urban youth culture, thereby creating a link which also echoes throughout the rest of the collection. In the same way, ice and water as motifs are represented in both stories through the imagery

created by descriptive sentences, this establishes what is for me a pleasingly paradoxical frame of the fluid and the fixed, giving a suitably diverse under-structure to the entire cycle. This maintains the “pattern of nerves” (Cox 1998:155) discussed earlier in this brief paper. Just as ‘nerves’ work in a human body to provide coherence as well as mobility, so does water, as diversely fixed yet shifting presence, capable of many different states, give life and movement to my collection as an evolving short story cycle.

The presence of such a variable linking device in the collection serves as the centrifugal force which allows the collection to expand as stories venture away from the ice rink which, as mentioned earlier, is the centripetal force in the collection. It is through contrasting forces such as these that a balance is maintained in *Ice Core*. In addition, just as I was able to select individual stories and critically compare them for the purposes outlined in this essay, so can any one story retain its independence when singled out for the purpose of leisurely reading.

My discussion thus far has identified several pertinent elements of *Ice Core* as a short story cycle. In the following section, I will continue to elaborate on the form, placing particular emphasis on regionalism as an important characteristic of the short story cycle and one from which place as a ‘central’ character emerges. Thereafter, the mobility that exists within a region will be discussed, bearing in mind my aim in *Ice Core* to create a strong sense of people in (and out of) place.

Regionalism

Regionalism transpires in a short story cycle through the specific mapping of locations illustrated within the plot of respective stories. It is through the “unity of place” (Reid 1977:49), the method of mapping a variety of stories within a specific region, or the

“topographical unity” as Shaw (1983:158) labels it, that real and imagined features of stories connect. This allows a “persuasive effect of realism” (Shaw 1983:158) to develop and strengthen the impression of a collectively lived space. It is thus important to understand the specifics of the real and imagined features which evoke locality and assist the portrayal of regionalism in a short story cycle. Marais (1992) suggests that the success of regionalism in the short story cycle can be found in its dual role of representing a cohesive and united region on a macro and geographical level, while also embracing the individual variance of its inhabitants and their experiences. To quote Trudi Adendorff: “the reader’s awareness of the character of the region and its community is formed through the process of recurrence and development, a process which transforms the region and the community into the sustained personae of the cycle” (1985:144). Marais (2005), here, also reminds us that through the recurrence and development of place within a cycle, not only is a strong sense of locale created, but place also emerges as the ‘central’ character in a collection. I will therefore continue by briefly unfolding the concepts of space and place as envelopes for imaginative detailing, and as contributors generating a realistic and habitual account of a selected region.

According to Chris Barker, space is considered as a kind of blank canvas. This is evident in Barker’s description of space as an “abstract idea” (2000: 292), a dimension which has the ability to be filled with a diverse range of “concrete and human places” (292). In her dissertation, titled “Fictional Constructions of Grey Street by Selected South African Indian Writers” (2007), Claudia Mamet explains that space only evolves into place upon the inclusion of social interaction. She adapts this outlook from Barker’s explanation of place as the heart of “human experience, memory, desire, and identity” (in Mamet 2007:8). The emergence of a sense of place can then be understood as a consequential result of layering previously “empty” (Barker 2000: 292) space through detailing.

For the purposes of this essay, I will elaborate only on details of *Ice Core* located within setting, characters, distinctive dialogue, and action. I believe the detailing of such elements within my collection takes precedence over any other contributors to place. Through a discussion of these major contributors, the environs of North Beach as place and the personae who people the ‘community’ of this region become, jointly, the central ‘characters’ of the collection.

Setting

In her discussion of “Setting as the world”, Janet Burroway points out the importance of setting in the creation of place. Burroway explains what she terms the “props of the world” (2003: 131) as necessary components in the creation of identities. ‘Props’ are understood to be the descriptive elements in a story that prompt the imagination to envision an actual ‘place’ as a story unfolds. Just as props in a theatre sustain the personality of a play, ‘imaginative props’ in the short story cycle serve to sustain an identity or certain familiarity of place within the story cycle. Throughout *Ice Core* various ‘props’ are used: “the ice rink”, “beans bunny with mutton gravy”, “skateboard”, “graffiti” ... it soon becomes clear that descriptions of infrastructure, foods, and material objects drawn from life continuously inform the setting of the stories and contribute to a reader’s experience of regionally emplaced authenticity. Place is also explained as the “backdrop” (Marais 1992:45) of a story: the illustrated environment inside of which plot transpires. (I am not completely comfortable with this term, as it might imply, for some, mere extraneous background, rather than an embodied physical geography which is utterly integral to the plotting and characterisation of the fiction.) Geographically, as I’ve said, *Ice Core* occupies the North beach area of Durban.

However, throughout the collection, stories interchange between locations, among them the Durban Ice Rink, Joe Cools, The Cashbox, Suncoast Casino, a barbershop in the

Mangrove Beach Centre, and the like. As a result of this constant movement from one type of infrastructure to another within a larger regional context, the North Beach community materialises as a mass of people interacting with, in and around a variety of everyday environments. This enables me, as the writer of *Ice Core*, to imply lived extrapolations wider than North Beach alone, and possibly to re-invent circumstances within a more complex cultural-geographical range of environments than the rink alone. Thus the fabrication of setting, through imagery of particular and existing venues located in the North Beach area, and through reference to familiar objects and practices associated with such infrastructures, allows for the regional evocation of North Beach as a concrete and animated footprint on the city of Durban.

Characters

Just as many other short story cycles incorporate a variety of characters that often appear inconsistently (see Ivan Vladislavić's *Missing Persons* [1989], for example), so too does *Ice Core* utilise an erratic method of characterising. This is especially evident in the collection when certain characters appear but for a brief moment, as with the unnamed girls in "Short Cuts", who gossip in the barbershop, or Iman and David in "Cane Train", who are friends of the narrator but do not re-appear in any other story. Such a random arrangement of characters in a cycle shifts away from traditional methods which maintained a small repetitive grouping of characters throughout a short story collection, characters whose identities were slowly and gradually exposed, through narrative layers and upon successive readings. In my case, I preferred to animate characters according to patterns of interruption, attesting to the nature of the shifting urban locale, and also to the diverse affiliations and allegiances of young people, for whom social groupings may be disparate and discrete, members of one group not necessarily ever connecting with those of another.

According to Paul Mills, in shorter fiction, characters need to possess a rhythm in order to “build up a picture” (2006:145). Such rhythm is attainable from “recurrent patterns of behaviour” (Mills 2006:141) found in descriptions of action, and illustrations of various identities expressed in gesture and physical attributes. However, he does clarify that while the identification of a character can be obtained through descriptions of appearance and actions, such representations must remain short (145) only because, realistically, people echo similar momentary rhythms within their own lives. The purpose of a diverse combination of characters can then be understood as the driving force within a short story cycle. One which, in avoiding the earlier mentioned attributes of traditional short fiction, seems more suited to depict the livelihood and motion of a region. The ability of a sparse collection of characters to move a narrative is especially evident in the story “Only Rinkrats” through the descriptions of a variety of characters (“Rinkrats”) as they make their way through the abandoned section of The Durban Ice Rink. Through emotive and descriptive expressions such as “oversized hoodies”, “we went on edgily”, “now we screamed and screamed”, and the like, an account of their movements, behaviours, feelings, and dress codes, becomes a primary driving pulse, or “character-rhythm” (Mills 2006:141), of the story. Such a driving force not only stimulates the interest of a reader but also aids the collaboration of various mobile circumstances and individuals in defining place as a shifting characteristic of the cycle, which finds stability in its restriction to a specifically designated region.

Distinctive Dialogue

It is also essential to understand the nature of dialogue in order to be able to comprehend the power with which it can render distinction within a region,. Dialogue is yet another portrayal of “character-rhythms” (Mills 2006:146), but one which only arises upon the presentation of necessary circumstances. Mills (2006) explains that such necessary circumstances generally present themselves in moments of crisis, and it is in the climatic points of prevailing tension

that dialogue can be most effective in representing real life. He does not, however, exclude the fact that dialogue can also be utilised in other instances within a story. Such instances occur when the very function, and consistent presence, of dialogue creates a tension or conflict within a story, without requiring any build up in order to stand effective. In the case of the latter, dialogue is used more consistently in order to drive the development of a story which, as part of the short story cycle, need only provide a fleeting experience that remains as instantaneous as the character-rhythms it includes.

Take the case of “Telephone Tjoons”, a story which emerges primarily through the device of dialogue. As the title implies, this story develops around the mundane and repetitive telephone conversations which the narrator endures while working at the Durban Ice Rink as a cashier, trapped in The Cashbox cubicle. In this story, dialogue is of course fundamental to the story premise, according to which the narrator-character must tediously, time and again, respond to the public’s idiotic telephone calls. Yet here, the dialogue is additionally central as it guides a reader to understand the narrator’s identity and subjectivity. The narrator’s sense of confinement presents itself as the story unfolds inside a small, claustrophobic space, one which signifies work and limit and curtailed opportunity. Such confinement of space encourages a reader to extrapolate to the construction of the narrator-character’s identity. She is young (even sometimes juvenile), sarcastic, frustrated. She is weary and irritable and obliged to continue, regardless. A felt sense of her identity can be derived from passages such as:

Yes. No. Yes no yes no yes. Duh? Try skate in your slops, mister. Skate on your ass for all I care. Bring your own skates. Dig around in the garage for your mother’s old pair, the ones she gave to your sister probably. But you’d look sweet in white, I bet. That tight lacing. Or you know what! I dare you to go down to your local sports store and ask them why there aren’t any skates for sale right there between the bikes and rollerblades. Maybe one day though. Maybe one day when it snows in Durban figure skating and ice hockey will take the city by storm. *Yes!* People need to get out more. There’s a whole world, you know. And never mind in one country.

And also:

No, never! Open? Us? The Ice Rink? On a weekend? Shit, we've been open every weekend for the past I don't know how many years. Yoh! As if this isn't one of the most popular tourist destinations in all the local holiday brochures. As if I've just been watching TV at home for the past few weeks, getting fat and getting paid for it.

It is the responsibility of dialogue to move between frameworks of private thought and outward story world, in order to stimulate tension and advance the progression of the story. While the telephone conversations in the above examples may appear lengthy, the mere fact that fictional accounts of conversation are based on real phone calls, comprising direct speech in the form of dialogue, reminds us that dialogue may be an important narrative driver within short story cycles, and can often enable the meaningful efflorescence of obscure moments that, in reality, are really quite short and ephemeral.

In effect, dialogue may possess qualities which are as distinctive as those of setting and characterisation, thus effectively contributing to the fabrication and unique defining of an outlined region. The act of distinguishing dialogue as notable to a particular area – or generation, for that matter – finds its roots in the use of diction. According to Burroway, the voice which produces dialogue and moreover gives it individuality, incorporates a particular use of diction. She considers diction to be a “combination of vocabulary, the words chosen, and syntax, the order in which they are used” (Burroway 2003: 43). Burroway then goes on to mention the significance of diction in moulding a reader's experience of a text. Diction may intersect with elements of familiar regional fact; it may inflect an emotive response to situations; and it may convey the tone and attitudes that shape the identities of characters. Consequently, diction is crucial to a writer's effective representation of regional place. Consider Chris van Wyk's memoir *Shirley, Goodness & Mercy* (2004), in which the often youthful characters found utilise a wide range of colloquial, 'slang', vocabulary. Van Wyk even includes a glossary in order to facilitate linguistic-cultural translation (311-313). The words originate predominately from Afrikaans: “skinder” meaning to “gossip”, “aan die

vrek” meaning lifeless, and “jislaiik”, an exclamation of surprise, all find their origin in the language which was once the official mediator of identity under Apartheid’. Instead of only harbouring resentment for the language, however, elements of postcolonial societies appear to have adapted an expressive use for languages other than English, in creating a vocabulary that differs slightly from region to region, but is still identifiably a ‘South African slang’ better able to communicate forms of community or sub-cultural experience than the classic received standards.

Similarly, the dialogue in *Ice Core* includes words such as “laaitie”, “vai”, “ja-aaa”, “Tjoh”, and the like. This deliberate model of diction also places my collection within a postcolonial context. My initial reason, however, for including slang within dialogue was to create a vibrant atmosphere that, while supplementing the theme of urban culture, also serves as a realistic account of the way young individuals of the North Beach area actually speak. In contrast to van Wyk’s choice to italicise and provide a glossary for his use of slang in his collection, I decided against such adaptations of writing. In doing so, I aimed to encourage the curiosity of a reader and maintain a unique style of writing dialogue. A style which enables characters in dialogue to ‘own’ their words, especially their street slang, the same way they would in real life conversation.

The dialogue in *Ice Core* includes an unusual extension of words as seen in “Biiig City Life”, whereby such words mimic the sound drawn out from actually shouting them. And also, through the use of apostrophes to indicate omissions of letters in words such as “hap’ning”, and the creative construction of words like “wannadah”, a realistic accent of the North Beach area emerges. Such accents, which employ the adaption of various languages in creating a type of urban dialogue in a South African society, are reminiscent of the power to redefine previous colonial regions. The stories in *Ice Core*, as they employ the diversity of characters and their distinctively postcolonial and urban dialogue, form part of a variety of

other threads that intertwine to engage the cultural diversity of such a region and allow North Beach, as place, to emerge as the central character of the collection.

Action

Another important feature of realism within a region is action. Action is responsible for the presence of connections and disconnections in a story that, according to Badroodien (2009), simultaneously bind inhabitants of a region while also keeping them apart. It can then be noted that such connections and disconnections, such actions, occur through the interaction of characters within a story. For example in “Only Rinkrats” when the narrator enters the abandoned section of the rink together with Kenny and Reagan a connection is made; however, when the narrator eventually slips away from them, a disconnection arises. It is through such patterns of connection and disconnection that conflict can be generated within stories, and Burroway (2003) suggests this is imperative to an engaging plot. She emphasises that a plot must include conflict, as purely descriptive passages, void of any action and therefore vacant of any shifts in power, cannot over extended passages in a story amount to anything of interest.

Burroway (2003) goes further in adapting Aristotle’s concept of a beginning, a middle, and an end, which demand a linear progression of plot development in a story underwritten by the structure of “conflict, crisis, and resolution” (181). She claims that a story should begin with an opening situation and develop a conflict, or perhaps a tension, through the actions that occur from characters engaging not only with one another but also with their environment, as well as with internal shifts of thought and feeling. Such activities occasion shifts of power amongst relevant characters, within aspects of an individual character and, at a macro level, amongst stories in a cycle. Burroway (2003) then affirms that conflict should peak at a moment of “crisis action” (183) and then a short “falling action”

should ensue. She suggests that the “falling action” might lead to a resolution of some kind (Burroway 2003:185).

As I see it, however, resolutions are not always realistic in a mobile urban space, where actions remain incomplete, even while such actions may occur daily, and where people drift into and out of the observer’s eye, carrying with them emotions and stories which can often only be briefly intuited, and perhaps only speculatively imagined. Narrative action within the urban short story cycle such as my own, then, premised precisely on the tensions of flux in relation to fixity, does not necessarily have to provide closure; instead, a story can afford to end as suddenly as real experiences might within a lived city. (Let it be said, here, that I do not favour this method in every story, preferring sometimes a subtle, lyrical shift in mood which creates a modicum of closure, for the purposes of the story moment, if not quite the certitude and finality of classic denouement.)

In the interests’ of exemplifying action within *Ice Core* as an important feature of power shifting and crisis, I will continue with a discussion of the story, “Late Skate”, setting it in relation to Burroway’s notions of story structure. In the beginning of “Late Skate” a connection is first noted when the narrator, through her action of entering the rink, interacts with Uncle G. They later disconnect when Uncle G retreats to skate-hire. However, it is from this moment on that a perceptible tension develops in the story. This tension is particularly relevant when the narrator wonders about Uncle G’s “mischievous smile” which makes her believe that something, some action, is about to transpire. As the story continues, connections and disconnections occur amongst the Rinkrats through actions of speaking, smoking and, in particular, the actions of the female Rinkrats as they plan to scare the new boys, Kenny and Reagan. Shifts of power later arise once all the Rinkrats enter the abandoned section of the rink. This exchange of power, based on a shared (yet also ostensibly concealed) fear of the unknown, stimulates the rising narrative current, and is premised on actions such as walking

very slowly in the dark, and disappearing and reuniting with each other. The climax, specifically, is supplemented by a prior action of talking about what or who the scary sounds could be. The edgy atmosphere culminates in a “crisis action”, seen when an ominous unknown figure appears, and causes the Rinkrats collectively to regroup, as one, and to scurry out the dark exit, once again a group undivided by tensions between boys and girls. The “falling action” is then conveyed via a sense of apparent calm, presented in the image of a falling feather. However, even this calmness remains an unsettling trace of the unknown, and it is not followed by any conventional resolution: the Rinkrats do not definitely discover the identity of the scary figure. Was it only Uncle G, playing silly games to spook them? Was it a more uncanny haunting by some of the missing people who are purported, once, to have lived in the gloomy interior of the back of the rink? In my opinion, this strange open-endedness is apt for the story. The swift yet passing and often unresolved experiences that exist in contemporary cities – movements of people, objects and materials; shifts in architectural styles and also of ideology and belief – all occasion citiness as constantly in transit, however determinedly town planners and public relations experts might attempt to place in circulate preferred marketing plans and definitive identities for particular cities. In this particular story, in my refusing to satisfy a reader’s expectation, I am mimicking the ways in which hopes, dreams, expectations don’t always materialise in urban spaces, and the short story cycle yet again suffices as a suitable form for writing within this context.

Writing Mobility

It is at this point in my discussion that I would like to return to the question of regionalism. According to Lionel Abrahams (1981) the regionalism of a collection arises from the recurrent visibility of “a population of creatures” across individual stories. Abrahams also mentions that this regionalism does not actually exist in a geographical sense, but is merely a construct of the author’s imagination. However, the “authentic” detail found within a story

can often mask the fictional attributes of regionalism (Marais 1995:30), therefore allowing a reader to assume the associated community and cultural as real. It was only upon experimenting with writing about places outside of the Durban Ice Rink but still within the region of North Beach, for example, that I felt a coherent, aesthetic sense of ‘a collection’ begun to emerge. Relevant here is the concept of mobility, since it not only supplements a realistic and lived sense of place in a short story cycle, but also emulates the very versatile nature of the writing process.

When it comes to life on North Beach and my stories, part of my desire has been to ‘capture’ small instances, to offer partial glimpses of and into a community; the cycle of pages becoming a record, of sorts, which is a trace of the ordinary, otherwise invisible, “pedestrian enunciations”, as Michel de Certeau (1998) might envisage them. In his essay “Walking in the City”, de Certeau brings the meaning of a city into creative, makerly being. He explains the city as an architecturally designed space seemingly paralysed by the motionless officiality of buildings and institutional practices that hold an urban setting under arrest. However, even with such concrete material constraints, compounded by the fixity of hegemonic discourse, he suggests that the realism, or definition, of a city really originates with the “masses that make some parts of the city disappear and exaggerate others, distorting it, fragmenting it, and diverting it from its immobile order” (de Certeau 1988: 102). In *Soft City* (1974), Jonathan Raban expresses a similar idea when he elaborates on the “creative play of urban living” (10). He differentiates between the “hard city” and the “soft city”, where the former refers to the concrete infrastructure and geographical outline of a city and the latter is the “illusion, myth, aspiration, nightmare” (10), and therefore personality contained in and associated with a place. He asserts that both a ‘hard city’ and ‘soft city’ need to co-exist as mobile and motionless features of urban living in order to maintain balance in a city.

De Certeau (1998) finds no satisfaction in a city observed from a fixed, aerial viewpoint. This is the city of distanced remove, where the viewer's relationship is that of subtracted voyeur rather than imaginative agent. In comparison, he highlights elements such as local myths, personal naming, individual memory and above all, the action of 'walking', as contributors to a lived yet constantly fleeting space. He believes it is the 'walking' pedestrians who create momentary experiences and ever-changing, urban animations, thereby unconsciously writing their own urban texts. A street-level point of view such as the one he favours is, therefore, imperative to the recognition of the type of divergent, versatile city life I am interested in depicting in *Ice Core*. The short story cycle lends itself to the accumulating of a range of strangely disparate and yet conversational city fragments such as de Certeau envisages.

In the case of *Ice Core*, North beach is rendered simultaneously both mobile and immobile. As mentioned earlier in this essay, within the area of North Beach various infrastructures co-exist and in *Ice Core* the illustration of places such as an ice rink, barbershop, club, supermarket, and even the Cashbox, contributes to the realistic setting of the area. Even though such settings remain imaginatively altered in stories, they still persist as powerfully resonant forces within the cycle, at once motionless and yet vibrating with interest. Also, as stated earlier, since my writing process was motivated by personal experience of the area, it's fair to say that I was, at once, time, a 'pedestrian' of the very streets found within my collection, a girl walking "Brickhill Road" and "Somtseu Road", tracing missing steps and thinking through life's possibilities and constraints. In some respects it was almost inevitable that I would seek to write this up from the same point of view I encountered while 'walking in the city'. My experience, in effect my habitus, thus encouraged me to portray the area as continuously shifting, a space in which individual life is marked by recurrent desires for re-invention even as the ordinary parameters seem to settle,

time and again, into a received fixity of the familiar. Even here, familiarity might sometimes breed the proverbial contempt, and at others inculcate a comforting sense of the known.

In *Ice Core*, the mobility of the area is expressed in individual stories such as “Short Cuts” where we see (paradoxically) a constant shift of actions and interactions of various characters between a barbershop, take-away, and street corner. Another story portraying mobility around infrastructure is “Some Kind of Skate”, through the descriptions of skateboarding in the local skate park and the fleeting exchanges of people between skating sessions at the rink. The constant shifting of short-lived experiences found within individual stories resonates throughout the entire collection and, as the mobility within *Ice Core* occurs interchangeably around motionless resistant forces, the short story cycle is then seen to bear significant realism to the specified area, North Beach.

Writing within an urban context is well suited to the short story cycle. Apt here is de Certeau’s explanation of “local authority” (1998:106). He considers this “local authority” to be a power which allows the city to gain significance; a kind of shifting power that by its very nature creates “a lack”(103) which continuously redefines the city. This ‘lack’, as de Certeau describes it, can be understood as the constant displacement experienced within a city due to the mobility of its inhabitants, where such mobility, instead of creating a continuum of some sort, constantly recreates short-lived experiences.

Excellent at emulating such a diverse and energetic effect is the short story cycle, as it often includes stories that offer a reader no more than a fleeting moment of a particular space or people. However, it is important to note that in the case of the cycle, relevant stories gain improved effectiveness and present a sense of substantial societal existence only when combined with others of a similar fragmented nature. Therefore just as the city gains significance and is brought to life by its inhabitants constantly in transit, the individual stories

in a cycle become a mode of transportation for a reader, and through the collaboration of such stories within the form, a reader can become attuned to the substance of a region. *Ice Core* informs a reader of various changes, experiences, and rhythms found within the 'environment' of the shifting North Beach 'community', thereby illustrating such environments as mobile rather than fixed, with individuals belonging to one shared group but not another, and their cultural or generational identifications cutting across any facile claim of wholeness and entirety.

The collection is, therefore, brought to life in an unsettled manner reminiscent of the very characteristics which shape the city. In this way, the collection also proceeds constantly to extend an invitation to a reader. Such an invitation requests that a reader experience North Beach at the same street-level that characters within each story experience it. And yet, in another sense, the collection lifts a reader away from the ground, offering creative and imaginative flights which might render the empirical place of 'North Beach' more likely to live in a reader's imagination. *Ice Core* also takes a form, in literature, that a reader might almost instantly relate to: whether s/he has actually been to North Beach or not, the very reaction and resistance forces which characterise the form of the short story cycle also resemble life itself, and in this way make space for reader's to occupy the author's imaginative treatment of place in the stories as both regional and also, strangely, universal.

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