

EVERYTIME WE SAY GOODBYE

It's not that I didn't like visiting my aunt. It's not that I hated her or anything. It's the place she lived in. I liked her more as I grew up than I did when I was small. Though even then I didn't hate her. Looking back I suppose I was a bit scared of her because she was different. She had her own ways and when you are small you want everyone to be the same. No, that's not true either. It was all right when it was just the two of us. Or just the family. It was when my friends came round and she would say things. Different things. I'm sorry now that I was embarrassed. But that's how it is when you don't know anything, and who knows anything when you are seven or eight. Like the time she came out with, "since I became a Buddhist..." I forget what she said after that. My mind went blank. I just wanted the world to open up and swallow me. I was ten or eleven I suppose and there were people around she didn't know, two friends from school, Hymie Rabinowitz and his brother Selwyn who was in the class below us and we were doing homework and she suddenly came out with this. And they were both Jewish and we were supposed to be Christians and she said this stuff about Buddhism and I knew she was just making it up.

But I'm getting off the point. It was horrible, the place she ended up and the very first time I went there and saw them all sitting in the lounge, just sitting there doing nothing, just staring into space, I said to myself that I'd rather kill myself then end up in a place like that.

She always played her music very loud. To irritate the others. And I'm sure it did. I loved that about her. Funny music. Way too heavy for me. And I'm not sure she really liked it either, though she said she did. I had the sneaking suspicion she did it for effect. There'd be banging on the wall when she turned up the volume. "It will do her good. That's Mrs de Wet. Deaf as a coot. I say hullo to her when I see her in the lounge and she never replies. But she can hear this." "I don't blame her," I said, "what is it?" "Balthazar's Feast." "What's that?" "Walton." I was like Mrs. de Wet in the lounge. Silent. "William Walton." "Oh" I said, none the wiser. "English. Fifties. Only thing he ever wrote that made any sense." She put her finger to her lips and moved the knob up a notch. "This is the best part," she whispered, "Mene, Mene Tekel Upharsin..." as Mrs de Wet drummed louder.

"The book of Daniel, Gladys, God's word, Gladys. Stop your banging and listen to the words."

She said she'd never done anything with her life and that is a sad thing to discover when you heading towards your three score and ten. I don't think she was right. I think she could have been a writer. She was good with words and she'd read almost everything there was to read from Henry Miller to A S Byatt. She'd also read all of Shakespeare and the Bible from Genesis to Revelations. The only person I knew who had. And I'd test her out sometimes to try to trap her. I'd open it anywhere and start reading, and most times she'd say something like "that's Ruth amongst the alien corn. I always had a soft spot for her. Fellow souls, Ruth and I. I never quite fitted in." If that was too easy I'd try the New Testament, close my eyes and open it somewhere. Funny thing is that she never lost her mind and one day if I get to be seventy or eighty I want to be like that.

There is a photo of her when she was thirty looking like a film star. She's sitting at a glossy Hollywood table with a glass top. The fingers of her left hand are slightly splayed so that you can see each of the rings she is wearing. I've often wondered what happened to the picture. Who got it. But I can remember every bit of it because I saw it so often. There was one with a large square stone. And then one with a circle of diamonds. And one with a single diamond set in a twisted rope of silver. I know it was silver because she told me. "I hate gold, it makes me look sallow." The ring was gone before I was born. She was like that. You said you liked something and she would give it to you.

Walton was a passing phase. He passed and then came back, but he never stayed long, which was lucky for the other ladies. And for me. Though I never said anything about her taste because I really didn't know all that much about music. Not that kind of music. I could have learned a lot

from her if I'd not had such a closed mind. I could have got to like Handel who was her all time favourite. "You want to hurry him on," she'd say, "it's like going for a walk with one of these," and her arm swept grandly over the whole place like a benediction, "he ambles along. But when he gets to the Hallelujah Chorus, you have to forgive him." Her smile when she talked like that was something I'll never forget. You could see she was in another place. "I don't know what people see in Mozart. He's useful in pregnancy. Calms the foetus, ensures the child will enter the world smiling with contentment. I've always thought him an intellectual lightweight. Over-rated."

"God wrote the words, Walton did the music. Was there ever in history such an inspired collaboration? '...King and courtier, wife and concubine, drank from those vessels; drank, and to their own gods gave the praise, gods of gold and silver, bronze and iron, wood and stone.'

"The way he repeats 'king and courtier, wife and concubine' again and again like a chorus, is already musical. 'Then in that hour an apparition came to them. They saw the fingers of a man's hand writing on the plaster of the palace wall, full in the lamp's light. Joint of a hand wrote there, and the king could not choose but see. And Daniel spoke out there in the king's presence. 'The writing I will read it willingly. You would bring out those cups, the spoil of God's temple to serve wine for you and your court, for wife and concubine. Gods of silver and gold, bronze you praise. This is why the hand appears to you, fingers that wrote what there stands written, MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN. ' With that, at the royal bidding, they clothed Daniel in purple and hung a chain of gold about his neck. A proclamation too was made that he held the third place in the kingdom... "

"Of course, God couldn't have spoken English as it hadn't been invented. But I'm sure it sounded just as good in the original, whatever that was. God would have seen to that. Ancient Hebrew perhaps? Yes, it must have been: God was Jewish then, wasn't He?"

" 'That same night, Balthazar, the Chaldean king, was slain, and his crown was passed to Darius, a Mede, then in the sixty-third year of his age.' Karma, yes. . Karma and retribution. What you sow and all that. Present politicians should listen. "

The house was set back from the road, hiding under an umbrella of ancient trees as if trying not to notice that it was on the edge of a bad neighbourhood. Disciplined shrubs set a good example. I say house, because it was a house once upon a time, but it had been added to so often it was impossible to see where the house began and the vandals had stopped. MON EPOS, she called it, even after they'd had a new R made at Signs Unlimited in Overport. Someone had stolen the street numbers too, not once, but three times. First the brass, then the second lot of brass, not as good, but brass all the same, and then the plastic ones.

My aunt's room was in the fifties annexe, a bit of building no architect would admit to owning.

"You go to my head and you linger like a haunting refrain, and I find you spinning round in my brain, like the bubbles in a glass of champagne..."

As I knocked, Rod Stewart stopped in mid sentence. "I'm glad you could come," my aunt said. She did not sound glad. Her skin was wrinkled like a walnut and just as brown from the sun. It looked as if big fingers had squeezed hollows in her face. Each time I saw her she was smaller than the week before. It was a race against time: would she die before she disappeared altogether?

"The great American Songbook?" I said. "Surprisingly good. Though I'd prefer Bessie Smith." "Bessie Smith?" I asked, playing for time. "Bessie Smith, the greatest of them all." "I've heard the name," I lied, playing for more time, hoping for clues. "She was a blues singer." I nodded. "The saddest story you'll ever hear," she went on. "She sang that?" "Perhaps not, but if she had, it would have had more soul. You have to have suffered. She did. He hasn't. The ambulance that came quickly to pick her up after the accident was white. And it took her to a white hospital. They wouldn't admit her. She bled to death right there in the back."

She pressed the button. "You go to my head and you linger like a haunting refrain..." He was allowed a few short phrases. "See what I mean? Pretty. Too pretty. A serviceable voice... He'll get there one day." She examined the back of the box. "Perhaps he will, perhaps he won't. It's all been too easy I suspect.

Bessie was in a class of her own. Ma Rainey was good too. But there will only ever be one Bessie Smith. Mind you, I'd like to hear him do a Bessie Smith Songbook one-day. 'Nobody Knows You When You are Down and Out', 'Downhearted Blues,' and of course, 'Hard Time Blues.' When he's ready."

I tried to get to see her once a week. Sometimes I steeled myself and went another time. It wasn't that I didn't enjoy being with her. It was just that the place smelled so bad. Not dirty. Musty. Like there was no air and they'd forgotten to change the water in the vases. Like death I suppose. I was careful never to make it every Tuesday or every Wednesday or whatever. No particular day. There's nothing worse than routine. It's a killer. You miss a Thursday and you are punished. This way every time was a sort of surprise. Nonetheless there was retrospective punishment for whatever transgression, conscious or accidental. "You didn't say last time that you liked my hair." I hadn't liked it and avoided saying something and then regretted the stupidity of not taking refuge in a white lie. "Did you see I'd moved the picture to the other wall so the sun would catch it?"

"I didn't know till today that Gershwin wrote this," she said, poking at the button and adjusting the volume. "The way you wear your hat, the way you sip your tea, the memory of all that, no, no, they can't take that away from me." Rod Stewart vanished again. "Nor did I." "Both of them, Ira and George." She dropped into the chair with the spindle legs and padded leather arms from which stray coir peeped like stubble.

"I hope you don't mind sitting in here, the lounge is depressing. All those corpses." The room wasn't depressing? The lounge was like an ante-chamber to the morgue, depressing certainly, but it had its own fascination. Her question was rhetorical, and even if I'd said I would have preferred the lounge and hated her room, she would not have heard. And, anyway, there was never time. You needed to be as nimble as Michael Jordan chasing a goal to get a word in before the next sentence rushed at you. "The only time there is any life is when the bell rings and then most of them can't get up. They are prised from their chairs and pointed towards the dining room and edged along."

There were nine others in the annexe, their rooms divided by a passage that never saw real light. Those on the left had a view onto a shaded garden, those on the right the side of the next block, a cliff face of brick to the sky.

You moved across the passage when someone died and today all eyes were on Mrs Saunders. She'd had another stroke, her third this year and her tenth in seventeen months. Muffled sounds came from a mouth that had slid to one side of her Francis Bacon face, a legacy of stroke number seven.

"She'll not see another Christmas. She'll be lucky to see Easter." She paused. "In fact she'll be lucky to see Dr. Paruk at noon."

"Or hear Rod Stewart finish the song."

Miss de Bruin, ninety-two, was first in line for her room, being the oldest, and the one who'd been there longest. She lived in a perpetual present since her mind had vanished. In A3 my aunt was flanked by Mrs. de Wet in A1, charming and vague and fragile, and Mrs. Ndlovu in A5 who had emphysema. Mrs Muldoon was across the way.

From the window I could see spots of water on the clay tiles like red confetti. The tiles steamed. "It's summer, the flowers are dying," Mary said, "and so are we."

The room was even hotter than the day, but as I'd walked into the annexe the hallway was cool. Something had happened for today it was fresh with jasmine and Johnson's Baby Powder. The new broom of the new matron?

But the passage was foul. It smelled of bedding. A patch of water had crept from under the toilet door along the marley tiles towards my aunt's room. Islands of yellow tissue glistened. Wet footmarks led to room A6.

"Mrs. Muldoon," she said, "her room's worse than the toilet. Poor soul. She leaks."

I looked down and saw in the consommé a used tea bag, a strand of dental floss, a pair of cockroaches on their backs and a sprinkling of black ants swimming for shore.

"You'll have something to eat?" "Only if you are." I looked at my watch. "Not too close to lunch?"

She ignored the question.

From the top drawer of a writing desk she extricated a plastic bag sealed with selotape. A sausage of cheese sweated in its cellophane skin. "A present from her," my aunt remarked addressing the cheese rather than me and gesturing towards A6.

From under a cloth with an embroidered edge she produced a bowl of purple figs.

"There's a way of doing this," she instructed, "first some fig and then some cheese." I obeyed. "See what it does? It gives it colour." Her face crumpled like a brown paper bag. I could not decipher the expression whether pleasure or pain. "But we can improve on the cheese. It could be heavier. Or sharper. We must work on it."

I tugged a spiral of black hair from the whitish flesh.

"Not the goat," she said, squinting at the object, "probably the hair of whoever made the cheese."

An untidy woman in mustard Goray skirt and polo top trundled past, tartan slippers like blunt fronted boats making ripples through the water. She turned her face towards us but there was no recognition. The stripes on her shirt went the wrong way for a large lady.

"Mrs. Muldoon," Mary said. "She keeps telling me that she's been robbed. Three tins of tuna, a chicken and her pension. Every day a different story. It has been four tins, two chickens and some postage stamps, her handbag, a slab of milk chocolate, a bottle of Anchovette and a tin of tuna. The tuna is constant."

"But you eat in the dining room?" "It's in her mind," Mary said, assembling scattered crumbs of cheese into a ball.

"They tell me that before she came here she used one pot to cook everything and only did the washing up on Fridays."

Watery footsteps made me look up.

Mrs Muldoon passed the door moving in the other direction, but this time without looking in.

"Shopping is her only passion. It's all she remembers. The mini-bus takes her there and brings her back.

And whoever else wants to go. Or is able. Wednesday is the big day. Yesterday she bought me a 350 gram packet of frozen chicken breasts, a minute bottle of low calorie mayonnaise, a tin of smoked mussels, some Callard and Bowser Butterscotch and this cheese."

I tried to interrupt. "Doris got the chicken. She has a fridge. Wednesdays are pure theatre. You see them shuffling round Pick 'n Pay, causing traffic jams with their trolleys. An hour later they are all on the pavement looking in different directions for the bus. Except for Mona de Bruin who takes a camp stool and does her crossword."

The tibushina outside her window had one vertical side as if a knife has descended from heaven. A disorderly white bougainvillea cascaded over the wall from the property next door threatening anarchy.

"Since they moved me from my room upstairs the shadows are all in the wrong places. I'm facing the wrong way. Not that I'm complaining. It's promotion getting out of the old building. Progress can be discomfoting."

A door in the passage slammed and then slammed again. Water gurgled in distant pipes.

"Remember Lottie?"

She reached for an envelope which had been roughly torn open. I didn't.

"She's gone, poor soul." My aunt gripped the letter with both hands close to her nose and moved it backwards and forwards. "She was never a beauty. No colour at all, pale eyes and skin like the underside of a lizard. And after seeing her you couldn't describe what she had been wearing. She made no impression at all. But she called herself Lolita. The conceit! We need our illusions."

Perhaps, I thought, I remembered the name. "Her flat had more statues than the Vatican, and some were almost as beautiful. Her majolica pots made the plants look Italian." Mary stopped talking and stared out of the window. "It's a serviceable view, only just." She lifted the plate and blew crumbs of cheese in the direction of the window at a tiny speck of a bird with a gamboge front. "He sits there every day and gargles at me. Occasionally I'm visited by a sad creature with limp feathers and with even less ambition."

She was silent for a moment. "You see someone every day of your life, and then suddenly they turn a corner, they are dragging their feet, their face drops on one side, they make funny noises with their teeth, they can't breathe properly and their skin comes out in black blotches." She paused, squeezed a fig between a crooked thumb and a crooked forefinger and ripped it in two. "At a certain age it is easier to give in and accept things than to change them."

"I wish I'd known her" I said.

"We would talk about everything. About pictures, about dogs, about death, about unhappiness."

She cleaned the juice from the fig on the cellophane wrapping and then twisted it round her fingers and looked away. "Some things matter more, some things matter less.

Some matter even less than that. But one can never be certain. You keep half your memories yourself. The other half are scattered amongst friends. You never know when they will come back to visit you. Or even if they will. Sometimes they do. Sometimes not. That's why you need friends."

"You'll miss her," I said. "Probably not. We'd not seen each other since 1974."

"But" she wrote?" She turned away. Minutes passed. I noticed that today her hair was a nest of Brillo Pads. "You've had your hair done. It suits you." What made me say it? The silence tricked me.

"It's the last time that monster experiments on me."

I saw then how her face had begun to slip down the hill. Was it the sadness? Smiling was not easy today. But she tried.

"One can feel more for your pets than for people. When my mother died I didn't cry. But when my dear, dear Hector died I was heartbroken. It hurt. It really hurt." She paused. "I'm sad not because Lottie is dead but because until the letter came I'd forgotten that she was still alive. And now she's dead and it still means nothing."

"You loved your dog more than your mother?"

"I loved my mother. But I could never talk to her. And that is the difference. When Hector died I had nobody to talk to. I cried."

A door slammed and somewhere down the passage a cistern rumbled.

"Lottie wasn't a stupid woman. She had a degree. In music. Not that I never ever heard her play an instrument."

Mrs Muldoon waded past us, stopped and presented a face as blank as a plate. Mary nodded at her. Mrs Muldoon turned slowly and looked behind her. And then she turned back. Good night," she said. Her feet began shuffling. Water splashed, a door was opened and closed.

"She's going to miss lunch again, poor dear, Mary said, looking at the Westclox on the desk. "Come four o'clock, she'll be tugging at the bell asking for breakfast. Clever, when you think about it, getting two days out of one. Ignorance has its value."

Mary examined the letter again and thrust it at me. "It does say she's left me her piano?" I nodded. "Whatever for? I can't play a note. Never have."

"You can't say no to the dead." Brisk footsteps in the passage interrupted her. A man of middle age in a white safari suit passed quickly.

"Dr. Paruk," Mary whispered. "Agnes Saunders." "Mrs. Saunders of the ten strokes?" I mouthed the words. She nodded. "And anyway there's nowhere to put it," Mary continued. "You could give it to the nursing home. For socials."

"MON EPOS?" My aunt wrinkled her nose. "Texan plain. She must have run out of Cavallah Kings. Doris Ndlovu." She pointed over her shoulder. "Emphysema. You can't teach an old dog new tricks. She bribes the staff."

Cigarette smoke mingled with the smell of potroast and potatoes. Clattering of metal and loud voices reflecting off the building opposite spoke of preparations for lunch in the kitchen. "Kill yourself but allow us the right to a death of our own choosing." A bone hand with crepe paper skin flicked in the direction of the opposite wall. "It always sets her off."

In the adjacent unkempt garden people were laughing. Clouds of blue smoke rose from burning sausages and steak. The tibushina disappeared, reappeared and vanished again. An empty beer can made a soft landing in a bed of delphiniums and rolled onto the paving. Mary gestured to me to close the window. "Soon we'll get the music from the car stereo. A few drinks and the dancing starts. I've never heard of people dancing during the day. And they never seem to work.

It's another world across there, bachelor flats with families. Too many people." Through the wall Mrs. Ndlovu was rehearsing her cough.

"You've met my other one? Mrs de Wet." I'd seen her in the lounge. I'd smiled. She'd hadn't noticed. "Gladys. Very stylish. Her suits are pre pre-Chanel. As ancient as they come." She paused. "Gladys, not the suits. From the waist down she's not all that old, but from the waist up she's not that young. When her husband was alive they spent centuries in Burma, doing what, I don't remember. Different now, all very mixed, as many foreigners as natives, but then it's the same all over the world. One mustn't be a Canute. Progress will happen if we like it or not. Gladys doesn't, I do."

We heard the footsteps returning. Dr Paruk stopped briefly. "Win some, lose some," he said cheerily. "Enjoy your day Mrs Edwards."

**"Every time we say goodbye
I die a little
Every time we say goodbye
I wonder why a little"**

It was never easy saying goodbye to my aunt. Would it be the last time? When you are that age life hangs on a thread. It was not something we'd talked about, but something we both felt. And so we both agreed never to say the words. It just happened. Nothing was said. We were that close that we both knew and words were not needed. Instead we developed a ritual, I'd say, "see you soon," and she'd reply "don't make it too long." It was easier that way. Optimistic. There was a future. Goodbye was so final.

You can't stop change. Sometimes changes are better. Sometimes worse. Sometimes things remain the same despite the changes. A year ago things had been much better. When she had her own house. But with Edna gone, there was no way she could carry on. And the stairs were beginning to be a problem, though she was too stubborn to admit it. Upstairs, downstairs. It wasn't war, and it wasn't peace. It was love and hate in equal measure. All the time. A truce here, a victory there. And then the next battle. My aunt upstairs, Edna below. Handel fighting 5FM. My aunt's curries at war with Edna's delicate palette of Mediterranean salads and fish stews.

They talked at each other, seldom with each other, tandem conversations, occasionally meeting. That, come to think of it now, was part of the problem. One of the reasons for their battles. They were both good talkers, bad listeners.

"It's the phone, Mary."

"What did Hilda have to say?"

"Your phone is ringing..."

"She's always across at Musgrave Centre shopping."

"Aren't you going to answer it?"

"No."

"You mean, Mary, you are not going to answer it?"

"Yes. You are right. No, I'm not going to answer it. Tell me about Hilda."

"It could be something important ..."

"At my age when I get here it's already stopped." My aunt pauses. It's part of her conversation strategy, like a boxer feigning a punch. It catches Edna each time. "Hilda, is she alright?"

"Hilda? She bared her teeth. I returned her smile. She was slumped on her trolley like a sack of mealies. Hardly seemed to see me." Edna's pauses are calculated too, signals that the subject is

about to change. Sometimes it does, sometimes she continues a moment and then slips into another gear. "Hilda looked right through me. You never answer the phone?"

"Sometimes when I'm there. If it's someone I want to talk to." A pause. "Hilda's hovering on the edge. I don't like it."

"She nearly had a head-on collision with an Everite plant pot. If it hadn't been for the cleaning lady..."

"Hilda used to phone. See if I was still here. Can't remember when she last called."

The phone stops and Edna says, "that could have been her."

"It wasn't. She never rings at this time. I could have passed over and she wouldn't have known."

"It looked to me as if she will beat you to the Pearly Gates." She pauses. "Or whatever entrance they have. You should answer your phone just in case."

"They must think I live in a caravan. Three rings and that's that. Why is your hair orange?"

"Orange? Just a tint, Pascal said it could do with highlighting."

"With the sun on it, it's orange."

"He gave it some fancy name."

"Naartjie? Mandarin? Paw Paw? Words, words, words. "

"The sun wouldn't show its face in this room."

"Orange is a harsh choice for your colouring."

"I loathe the shopping centre at this time. All those carols and holly and you're surrounded by the walking dead."

"Paw Paws are that colour."

"I got the last two turkeys. Self basting. Canadian. The manager said they might be getting more just before Christmas. Couldn't promise though."

"You got me an American one last year."

"The year before."

"Not last year? I didn't understand what it meant, self-basting."

"Last year. You are right. I think they inject them with something."

"Weird. Not much flavour but nice and moist. Tender. You're very kind, Edna."

"It can be a sad time, Mary dear. I'd hate to think of you all alone and not celebrating."

"Edna, I didn't mean to be rude about your hair ..."

"Daphne's coming for a few days you said?"

"I'm expecting the visitation any moment now."

"She's a dear. "

"You know how she bosses me, Edna, but we get along. With effort. Sporadically."

"Perhaps you're too alike?"

"Spare me the thought, Edna. Daphne's DAYS OF OUR LIVES and YOU magazine. Don't for a moment believe it's pure altruism. Roy's been called away suddenly. Hong Kong or something. It would have been their first Christmas together."

"Surely not. They've lived together for aeons."

"I mean as man and wife."

"No children yet, Mary?"

"She's never mentioned any."

"She must be thirty something?"

"Three. Time is marching on. 'Be fruitful and multiply.' "

"Nice of her to come down. I got you some fish fingers too. They were on special. And the usual pudding. Wareings of course."

"Edna, you shouldn't..."

"You always say that Mary. And some mince pies." Edna pauses. A little longer than usual. "You can't go wrong with Wareings. Mary, I'm sorry about Hector."

Mary does not reply.

"It's good Daphne will be here."

"I can't believe he's gone, Edna, I really can't."

"Daphne will take your mind off it. Perhaps. And I'll have Etienne. He's a darling boy. Boy? I must stop that. He's third year university."

"You did tell me, Edna. History isn't it?"

"Music, Mary. He wants to be a composer. I'll bring him around. He's scornful of my tastes. I'm sure you two would have more in common. I must say that I like something with a bit of melody. But I'm not a total philistine. Ballet music is about as far as I can go with the classics."

"Ballet's Biggie Best."

"Copellia and Swan Lake..."

"Torvil and Deane without the ice."

"I made the dreadful mistake of getting him the three box set of 'Popular Classics' by Andre Kostelanitz when I knew he was going to do music. I'll never live that down. Not that he was rude. He's such a gentle boy. He said that he wouldn't get the chance to play it with all his studying and that he'd like me to keep it for him so we could listen to it together when he came to Durban. But I knew."

"I don't want soothing music, Edna. I want to be stimulated. Woken up. A cold shower not a warm bath. Your Mr Kostelanitz sounds as exciting as decaffeinated coffee."

"Perhaps they'll have one of those sundowner concerts in the Botanic Gardens over Christmas?"

"If you have any ideas about me, I'll say no, but thank you, in advance. Daphne would love to go. She's Whitney Houston and Mario Lanza. And she's recently added Neapolitan loves songs. They tone in with the Tuscan townhouse."

"Just a thought, Mary. It IS the festive season."

"And for God's sake, Edna, don't tell her that Naples and Tuscany are not exactly neighbours. Our illusions are our armour against the awfulness of reality."

**"No tears, no fears,
Remember there's always tomorrow.
So what if we have to part
We'll be together again."**

My aunt would not accept that Hector was dead. She kept talking to him for weeks. I heard her. I swear she thought he was still around. Funny the tricks the mind plays. They call it denial. I'd read about it. Seen it on television but this was the first time I'd seen it with my own eyes.

She and Daphne were better apart than close by. Two strong-minded women with ideas that went in opposite directions. But in their own way they needed each other. And, I suppose they loved each other. Well, occasionally, anyway.

I'd only met Daphne when I was much younger. I knew her from what my aunt told me. I suppose it was a warped picture. One sided. I was curious to see the other side. Daphne's coming was a cloud over the house. Christmas cheer was in short supply at 142 Bellevue Road.

"Flesh of my flesh you might be but that does not give you licence to rule my life."

"I simply said the curtains in my room are falling apart."

"They will see me over Jordan, Daphne."

"You're not leaving yet."

"It is not for us to say, Daphne."

"Mrs Whatever-her-name-is-next-door can look right in."

"With cataracts as thick as elastoplast I doubt she sees anything."

"That's hardly the point, mother, for your own sake you could get new ones."

"Could or should?"

"Both, mother, both."

"They've been with me through good times and bad. There's no reason, Daphne, to pension them off now."

"There's every reason. They are disgusting."

"Let me remind you, child, that this is my house. Whatever you and Roy do in your nice-little, neat-little, sweet-little town house in wherever-it-is, is your business. I'll run my life my way."

"It's not as if you are hard-up, mother."

"The obsession with age is the curse of the young. If it's old, throw it out."

"If it's finished, replace it. Yes."

" ' I set no store by material things: 'The world and its desires passes away.' "

"John 2 Verse 15. You drummed that into me as a child."

" 'Do not love the world or anything in it.' "

"You quote the Holy texts to excuse your meanness."

"As a single mother life was not easy."

"Three husbands. What on earth are you talking about?"

"I might as well have been single. The help they were."

"That's hardly the point, mother."

"Don't confuse being frugal with being mean. It was not easy."

"As usual, mother, you are twisting my words. You are getting off the point."

"I feel deeply wounded. To be called mean by my own flesh and blood."

"This is ridiculous. I simply said get some new curtains."

"Do these look like the hands of a mean woman?"

"Oh for God's sake mother, pull yourself together."

"Gnarled and twisted they might be, but these are the hands of someone who has washed and scrubbed all her life to see that her children..."

"For God's sake mother shut the hell up."

"So that's what it's come to."

"I don't know what's eating you but..."

" 'False witnesses rise up against me, breathing out violence...' "

"Are you surprised, mother, psalm 34."

"Psalm 27 actually."

"You're being melodramatic 27, 34 what does it matter?"

" 'Though an army besiege me my heart will not fear...' "

"I have heard enough. I am going out for a walk. You're mad. Mother, you are mad."

" 'When evil men advance against me to devour my flesh...' "

At this moment, on their very first day together in a year or more, they had managed an argument more spectacular than usual. Daphne had stormed out of the house, slamming the door so hard that Edna had woken from her afternoon nap and come out onto the verandah to see what was going on.

Inside, a Mona Lisa smile, only broader, my aunt chuckled in victory. "She never knows how to take me. Caught again Daphne. Sarah Bernhardt could not have done better..."

**"I'll be seeing you in every lovely summer's day
In everything that's light and gay
I'll always think of you that way
I'll find you in the morning sun
And when the night is new
I'll be looking at the moon
But I'll be seeing you."**

Etienne and I had been at school together. Funny how things work out. It was through him that I got to know his gran, who had come down to Durban when her husband died to be with her daughter because the house was too big and anyway it was not safe for an old woman to live alone in a place like Kensington. And it didn't work out. It never does. Mothers and daughters living under the same roof, and it wasn't long before his gran wanted to be on her own with her own place. But not completely alone, because she didn't have any friends in Durban, and she

wanted somewhere close enough to Etienne and his mom and dad and Etienne's sister. And so I said to him that my aunt had this big house on the Berea and it was divided into two flats, an upstairs one and a downstairs one and my aunt was looking for someone to take the bottom one because the previous lodger, Mrs. Swart had suddenly fallen over dead, and my aunt didn't want just anyone to take the flat and so didn't want to put an advert in the paper because you don't know who you might get. And as she had this hobby of crime she knew just what was going on in every part of Durban. She studied it and I think she knows more about criminals than the police. And so Etienne told his gran and it worked out well. His gran, Edna is younger than my aunt, not much, but they are close enough in age to have lots in common.

**“It's not the pale moon that excites me
That thrills and delights me, oh no
It's just the nearness of you
It isn't your sweet conversation
That brings this sensation, oh no
It's just the nearness of you.”**

I won't say that my aunt and auntie Edna's relationship was a bed of roses. Often there was just too much of the 'nearness of you' for comfort. Love and hate. War and peace in equal measure formed the rhythm of their lives. Two separate flats meant they could both lick their wounds in private. Not that they fought that often. It was more that they were both keeping their hands in. Keeping in practice. My aunt for her sparring matches with Daphne, and Auntie Edna for Etienne's mother. Oh, she wasn't really my aunt, but I called her that. And, yes, there was much 'sweet conversation.'

The first thing that Etienne said when he arrived from Johannesburg for the Christmas holidays was “guess what, Gran, I'm learning a new instrument. “ “That's nice, dear. But you're not giving up the piano?”

“No Gran, of course not. But they encourage us to try other instruments.”

“I'm glad to hear it, Etienne. I have never heard anyone play the piano so exquisitely.”

“Thanks, Gran, for the compliment. But that's not how they see it. My lecturers and my professor.”

“Perhaps I'm biased?”

“Could be, Gran. Or you've not heard how it should sound.”

“Possibly, Etienne, a little of both. MY music is of a different kind from yours. I still think you play beautifully. Chopin was it?”

“Last time you were in Johannesburg?”

“Easter, yes.”

“Brahms, actually. But Chopin's close.”

“Names, names, names.”

“No, I'll never make it as a performer. I'm going to be a composer, and so they like us to try different instruments so we have a feel for their different possibilities. We don't have to be virtuosos for that.”

“I think I understand, my boy.”

“So I'm working on the violin. And the ugubu. That's the Zulu violin thing that Princess Magogo played. And the mbira too.”

“So you are going to compose African music?”

“Who knows, Gran, I'm keeping an open mind. You never know where ideas come from.”

“I'm so proud of you my boy. So proud.”

“It all ties in with my research for our new project.”

“Explain to me as if you are talking to a child, nothing too technical. But a bright and interested child.”

“OK Gran. We are to write a musical next semester.”

"Sound of Music? Something like that?"

"Yes, Gran, but no. Nothing like that."

"So what is it dear?"

"As I said I'm learning the mbira and I want to use it quite a lot. Mainly because the others aren't."

"The mbira! Do you blow it, suck it or hit it?"

"Don't be silly Gran. Don't you know what it is? None of those things. You pluck it."

"So it's a sort of harp?"

"More like a portable piano. But very very small. You hold it with both hands and use your thumbs. You're not getting mixed up with a kora are you Gran?"

"I doubt it as I've heard of neither."

"You've just given me an idea, Gran. The kora would be amazing to use too in the musical. It's got the most gentle sound you've ever heard. And you can play it while you are walking about. Just like the mbira. So I could think of getting them to do a slow dance while playing their instruments. Wouldn't that be exciting?"

"Sounds fascinating."

"You'd love African music, Gran. It's full of geometric proportions and it's hypnotic because of the repetition. They keep playing a phrase over and over but it's never monotonous. It sort of drugs you. Puts you into a trance. Like meditation."

"I think I'm a bit old for that sort of thing."

"My mbira's in my suitcase. I'll play it for you later. Promise I won't put you into a trance, Gran. It's from Zimbabwe. The kora is from way, way up north. And it is made from a huge gourd and a long wooden neck with lots and lots of strings."

"My ignorance is infinite, Etienne. It only I'd paid more attention when your grand father and I were travelling. Each exotic place we went to must have had its own special music. But he had tunnel vision: blinded by the past. Unless it was buried in the ground, he didn't see it. Wasn't interested. And I tagged along like a dutiful wife."

"What's that smell Gran?"

"Smell?"

"It's everywhere."

"Oh that. It's Night in Kashmir. It's a new one. Mrs Haffajee was out of Sandalwood. Said I'd like this."

"Sort of spicy and stale, Gran."

"I thought it was maybe a little too sweet perhaps? A bit flowery?"

"Funny flowers. More like dog and fish."

"Oh that. That's Mrs Edwards upstairs."

"Mind if I open a window, Gran?"

"It will only make it worse. It's Friday. Mildred's cooking pilchards. Catholic. In the kia."

"How can you live here, Gran?"

"I thought you were referring to the incense."

"It's hectic! The dog is a pretty powerful smell."

"One must learn to focus on higher things. You'll get used to the everyday odours of life if you had lived here as long as I have, Etienne. Poor Hector's been pretty much under the weather for a while. Can't see him lasting much longer. Sweet natured animal with a fascinating history. He performed in the Egyptian Circus. The smells I can deal with. It's the music I find hard to take. Who was it said 'Hell is other people's music'?"

"There I disagree with you, Gran. The music I could deal with. The stranger, the odder, the weirder the better. But the smells..."

"If the human race hadn't learned to adapt over the centuries we wouldn't be here today."

"The Egyptian Circus? Really Gran. Tell me more."

"It's a long story and we'll need time."

"Promise, Gran? You've got to promise."

"I wish you'd known your grandfather. It was one of his themes. That's him over there."

"I know Gran."

"... and that is Phillip Tobias on the right."

"I know Gran."

"A lovely man."

"Tobias?"

"No, your grandfather." Etienne loved teasing her. "Tobias is a darling too. Caught me again, you wicked boy."

"The fish is pretty bad, can we light another one, please Gran?"

"Let's try this one. I can't make it out. Your eyes are better than mine."

"Taj Mahal."

"Etienne, you've not met my friend upstairs, why not go up and ask her if she'd like to come round for a drink this evening."

"Ok, Gran, I'll do that but you must promise me something..."

"Let's hear what it is first, I'm not used to blackmail..."

"Promise me I can tell you all about the flight today. It was the best ever, and I met such weird people."

"I'd love to. Now run upstairs and ask Mrs Edwards."

Etienne told me later that he wished he'd met my aunt long ago. She knew so much and was so different from anyone he'd ever met. And she seemed to like him too. Etienne is a good listener and that is always a plus with my aunt. She was busy with her hobby and she asked him to come in which he did and he said that he'd never seen anything like it in his life and that my aunt must have read lots of detective stories and seen lots of crime films. But that was later. When he came back from meeting her for the first time, he was even more excited to talk about the flight.

"You won't believe this, Gran, I told you about all the odd people, but, listen to this, sitting in the same row, but way over there, in the middle section, was Mrs. Edwards' daughter, Daphne, I met her just now. Can you believe it?"

"She's here for Christmas too. Must have booked the same off-peak special."

"Of course I didn't speak to her because I didn't know it was her, but I recognised her right way now because she was sitting right next to this woman who talked the whole way nonstop, Mrs du Plooy who was coming to Durban to see her son Boet. Of course I couldn't help seeing Daphne because she was in the next seat but she wasn't looking in my direction – I think perhaps she sensed a problem with Mrs du Plooy and deliberately kept looking the other way.

"Sounds like it is going to be a saga, so perhaps we should get ourselves something to drink and go and sit on the verandah?"

"Can I do it for you, Gran? And can I have a coke, please?"

"You start your story, Etienne while I do the drinks, I can pour and listen, so you go ahead."

"OK, there was a mix-up over seats in the row in front of me, and Mr. Nel in A (window seat) and Mr. Ntanzi (B) were moved to my row, and then their seats were swapped. Mr. Ntanzi was put next to the window and Mr. Nel next to me, though why this was necessary I didn't understand as they were together. They spoke Afrikaans to each other and English to everyone else, though in the fifty-five minutes they said little to each other and even less to me. In fact, nothing at all.

Mr. Ntanzi read *The Citizen* and Mr. Nel, *Beeld*.

Mrs. du Plooy, across the aisle, nudged me with a camera. "Would you take a photograph for me?"

"Of you?" I asked.

"No, of that," she said pointing at Mr. Ntanzi's window.

Her seat was D, across the aisle but close enough to talk if we both leaned inwards, I to the right, she to the left. I didn't know then that her name was Ina du Plooy (nee Oosthuizen) or that this was her first flight, that she was 49, that she was anxious about turning fifty.

But at this moment all she was worried about was the photograph. The camera was a box with a lens and a shutter. Although I was a little closer to the window though not much, I didn't know

what she wanted me to do. What little view there was played hide and seek between people shuffling down the aisle. 'Are these the people I would choose to die with?' always flits across my mind the moment I find my seat: and then vanishes until the next time.

"I'll wait until things settle," I told Mrs. du Plooy.

She was going to Durban, she said because her son, Bokkie, had just lost his job (Traffic Police, 'signs and lines') and because her daughter-in-law, Melanie, Dawie's wife, had had a miscarriage, but was pregnant again.

"The plane is called *Umgeni*," I said, "that's a river in Durban, perhaps it means good luck. A Durban plane going home to Durban."

"I could do with it," Mrs. du Plooy said.

Five girls in their twenties with look-alike braided hair, carrying ghetto blasters, large toy animals in clear plastic bags, made their way to the back. They wore identical T-shirts with BOUNTIFUL BAZARUTO silk-screened across their bosoms. They chatted in a French, which had spent a long time in Africa.

Between gaps in the passengers, Mrs. du Plooy leaned over and continued her story. She had been born in Welkom and had fallen in love with the maths teacher, Fanie Smit when she was in Standard nine and that he was married with two small children and that they used to meet secretly at the Europa Hotel on Wednesday afternoons if the weather was bad and softball was cancelled (Fanie coached the second girls' under fifteen team), that the affair had gone on in fits and starts for nearly twenty weeks during which time they had slept together three times, (1962 had had the highest rainfall in the Goldfields since they started keeping records at the end of World War II), that he had wanted to marry her, or so he said and she had believed him, and he probably would have, but he had suddenly been transferred to Viljoenskroon when they changed the school from a dual medium one and had become Morewaghoerskool and had lost 45 English speaking pupils...

A party of fifty three Germans, (*The Holiday Hunters*) surged around us opening and closing stowage hatches and stuffing them with designer bags, duty free packets and anoraks. There seemed less of them once they'd sorted themselves into spare seats in rows 31 to 43.

Mrs. du Plooy's camera, (Ina, she'd said, between the Germans, 'with an I') Ina's camera was still poised and I still waited while she picked up the end of her broken sentence and fitted it to the next part. She had wanted to become a nurse like her late aunt Bossie, Frikkie's wife, but because her family didn't have the money to send her to college (there was only one bursary and her best friend Julie had got it), she'd settled for a typing course and got a job with Venter and Venter who were lawyers in Odendaalsrus and it was there that she met Jacques and it was love at first sight.

"Life's like that" I said, holding the camera up between her face and mine.

"Just the view, for the kids, they've never been on a plane either." I clicked and hoped I'd got a bit of Sudanair, some Gauteng brickwork and the fin of an Alitalia 747. We were being asked to pay attention to the safety demonstration so I put a finger to my lips and she stopped.

All around the air was filled with foreign sibilants hissing through plastic teeth. People kept saying *Ja Ja* as if one was not enough; I was an English island in a German sea. Captain Thwaite wished us a pleasant trip as we taxied to the runway.

Ina's father had a mining accident and couldn't go on working (a rockfall, "two blacks got killed, no whites, thank God"). She had to go back home to help her mother look after him, so in a way she got her wish to become a nurse.

"Funny how things happen," I said.

Mr. Nel had reached page seven and was lingering over a photograph of Anneline Kriel. His companion was doing a crossword.

Ina began to tell me about Boet, her second son, who was a champion ballroom dancer and who did work in the theatre and had helped produce the new *Ipi Tombi* which was his favourite musical and which “was going take the world by storm”. A steward asked her to fasten her belt and I helped her. She asked if I’d flown before and I said many times.

“This is my first.”

“I know, you said so.”

She said that when her husband was still alive, (“Barnie, a real gentleman, you would have liked him, everyone did, never used bad language”) they often drove to Durban in five and a half hours in the Fairlane and that he had only once been caught. That was between Villiers and Warden but they hadn’t fined him because it turned out that his friend Schalk Cronje, whose brother had been married to Moira whom he had gone out with for a few months after he’d come out of the army, had lived in Florida in the same street as the man who set the trap. She couldn’t remember his name.

I said it was a small world.

The plane dipped to the left as it came out of its climb and the lights of Kempton Park slipped past the wingtip.

“Just like fairyland,” Ina said.

“Pretty much,” I agreed.

When the trolley appeared from Business Class Mr. Nel folded the picture of Anneline and stuffed it into the pocket in the back of the next seat and waited.

I looked behind me and saw that the Germans were all wearing hats, baseball caps, panamas with wide brims, soft cotton sun hats, all with *Holiday Hunter* in red. Three women wore peaks.

Captain Thwaite told us that he anticipated some cumulus as we neared the interior and so for our own comfort we should keep our belts fastened throughout the flight. Mr. Nel unclipped his belt and reached down and slipped his feet out of his Adidas trainers, put his head back and went to sleep.

Bad weather was expected over Vrede.

“Vrede?” Ina asked.

“Not yet, but in ten minutes or so.”

“That’s a coincidence. Part of our family comes from Vrede, but we’ve lost touch.”

“That’s life,” I said.

“A cousin’s husband, I forget his name, had a trading store outside the town and one night it burned down and it looked like the end of the world for them but then they found that the insurance would pay out and they had more money than they ever had made from the shop and so were able to move to Volksrust where he bought a butchery.”

“Every dark cloud,” I said.

Dinner was promised.

“I don’t think I could eat anything,” Ina said, “I didn’t know you got food on the plane so I had a packet of chips in the lounge. Jumbo. Cheese and onion. Willards, not Simba. R5.95.”

On my left Anneline who had been taken out briefly, was being smoothed flat and folded. Mr. Nel was telling the hostess that Mr. Ntanzi would like a whisky and he’d have a brandy and diet coke.

“Would he like ice with his whisky?”

Mr. Ntanzi was questioned by Mr. Nel.

“He’d like ice and soda.”

“We are out of soda, would he be happy with Schoonspruit?”

Mr. Ntanzi nodded.

“Yes, that’s OK,” Mr. Nel said helping himself to four packets of salted nuts.

Sharon had dropped Ina at Jan Smuts at four which had been an hour and half early as she had to pick up her husband from work in Benoni as his car, a Cortina, 'gunmetal with twin exhausts', was in the garage in Edenvale where they lived. "Extension 5, next to Harmelia, a simplex, 2 bedrooms, both en-suite, open plan Italian kitchen, paved patio and thatched bar/braai area, a pool and a jacuzzi, and it's clinker brick throughout so it's very low maintenance, air conditioned and full security and it has a TV room and a conversation area and there's room at the back for a granny flat when we get the cash."

"Cosy," I said.

The steward couldn't wake Mr. Nel, but Mr. Ntanzu put his table down and he left a tray in case he woke. He was snoring and a thin line of saliva dribbled from a corner of his mouth, meandered through the stubble of his chin, hovered and then dropped.

My fillet of Kingklip had met its Mornay Sauce for the first time somewhere over Standerton and they seemed unhappy together. The fish was wettish, the sauce dry, the flesh smooth and soft, the sauce pimped with cheddar. The plastic fork buckled as I pressed into the food. The Mornay lifted exposing silver skin, and dropped back into place. There was an indentation from the fork but the skin was not scarred. I ate the carrots and the rice and sealed the remains with the aluminium lid.

The captain's voice crackled over our heads, He regretted that due to unforeseen turbulence they would be "terminating the bar service".

"Below to your right you'll see the little town of Vrede."

Ina smiled at me and stood up to try to see out of the right window across the far aisle.

"It celebrated its centenary some years back. For the information of our foreign guests, I would like to say that in that time the white population has remained stable but that the black population has grown by one thousand five hundred percent. In the new South Africa, of course, we don't count in the same way."

Necks craned to see the outcrop of dwellings which was 'home to 4301 whites and 46000 blacks and 32 coloureds'.

"Vrede means peace" Ina said.

"I know," I said, "but thank you. Nice name."

As the engines changed to another key we were told we had started our descent and that Ladysmith was immediately below us. It was invisible behind the cloud.

Boet, Ina said, had just left Rhoda who had gone off with a German. They'd met on holiday in Toti in December. She'd taken the kids, Sharon (5) and Jason (4) and has moved in with Heinz in his duplex in Roodepoort. He has two kids as well from his first marriage, twins Heinrich and Hannelie, (3). He has access every second weekend so it looks as if everything is going to be fine for Rhoda.

"It's hard on the kids," I said.

"Boet is staying with the Coetzees on the Bluff until he finds a job and can get his own flat. He used to work for Telkom in Witbank and is fully qualified but with affirmative action you couldn't be sure nowadays but there's always room for qualified people and Boet isn't afraid of hard work and he's not looking for a free ride."

Lumps of cumulus sped past us as we headed downwards. Old arms pink from the sun had begun tugging at belongings in the overhead lockers. As we hit the runway, music burst from the roof. The closing notes of *What a wonderful world* melted into Perry Como ambling through *It was just one of those things*.

"Like I said Gran, it was like I was flypaper. These weird people all around me.

"I loved that, Etienne. You are a very good storyteller. Must be something you've inherited from your grandfather. He could keep us enthralled for hours. It was all in the detail. Nothing escaped

his eye. He needed it for his work. And he developed a memory for facts like nobody I've ever come across. Out there in the wilds it was seldom possible to make notes. So he remembered. He stored it all in his head till he had a chance to write it down."

"Perhaps it's in my genes, but memory training is part of our course. You never know when something you've heard, something you've seen, or something you've felt will be the start of an idea. Nothing comes out of the blue. Everything is based on something, on some experience. We are trained to be observant."

"Is it going well, my boy?"

"The course? I'm loving it. It's a good Music School. The best in the country they say. I was hoping you'd help me with my project, Gran."

"I would if I could but I doubt if I can. I'm tone-deaf, devoid of rhythm and less than ignorant. It is not my field. I love Sinatra of course."

"Sounds perfect to me. It's a musical. We have to write a musical, each one of us, this next semester. It's a final year assignment. And I want to do well. I must get a good degree."

"No, Etienne, you are barking up the wrong tree here..."

"Not at all, Gran, I really mean it. I need you. I've got some great ideas. For the music that is, but I'm vague about the plot. All I know is that I want you to be the main character."

"Me? I'm flattered, Etienne. I really am. But the idea of an old lady croaking and wheezing her way through a few numbers and doing the odd high kick is macabre. It's certainly not a musical I would go to. And I can't think of anyone who would. Obscene."

"It's just that. It's because it's never been done before that I am so curious to experiment. I'm not interested in following in someone else's footsteps. Repeating the Broadway formula. I want to break new ground."

"That it certainly would do. But why me?"

"Because you have had a such a rich life. It's those layers of experience that are magic."

" 'Layers of experience,' sounds like a quote from somewhere. Certainly your grandfather and I were lucky to go to places not everyone would have been able to. His work opened doors."

"Exactly, Gran. Turkey. India. Micronesia. Your times with the Bedouins. Close your eyes and put your finger on a map of the world and you are bound to have been there. Or somewhere close."

"So you want to pick my brains?"

"Imagine how inspiring each exotic place would be when I come to compose the music. An Inuit lullaby. A Cambodian love song. Some astonishing hymn from Japan. I've already got a sketch for a scene based on Liliuokalani."

"You've got me there, Etienne."

"Queen Liliuokalani, the last Queen of Hawaii. She wrote hundreds of songs. Well at least a hundred and fifty. It's a really poignant story. They plotted against her and had her deposed so that the Americans could grab her country. It's such a modern theme."

"So the avaricious bully-boys were at it forever and a day? Poor Hawaii. No oil. What on earth were they after? Coconuts? Hibiscus forests? What could they have wanted?"

"Where it is was its downfall, Gran."

"Strategic? Of course, Pearl Harbour and all that."

"And the songs are so haunting. They put her under house arrest. Just like Winnie. And Fatima Meer."

"Helen Joseph was my favourite."

"Perhaps the musical should be about amazing women? I'm sure you've heard Aloha 'Oe? That's the Queen's song. One of them. It's a cliché now. They do it to death in every travel film. But it's still so beautiful. Her farewell hymn to Hawaii when the Americans took her country away. They say she saw two lovers saying goodbye in the moonlight and that was the inspiration. I'd like to use her words in the original Hawaiian. They say the language is like flowers. "

"You should talk to Mary upstairs. She's had a life that few would believe. And she has the oddest taste in music."

"Like what, Gran, like what?"

"Now you're asking. Let's say it is not Sinatra. Or Tony Bennett. Or Mantovani. Though a lot of it is orchestral. And you wouldn't hear it on East Coast Radio. Or even SAFM. You'll have to ask her. And she sometimes plays it at a thousand decibels. It drowns out the taxis and the Myhahs. She's bound to have an outburst while you are here so you'll be able to hear for yourself."

"Sounds amazing to me. Alban Berg do you think? Or John Cage?"
"Ask her, no point in plying me with esoteric questions."
"Perhaps I could use both of you?"
"Geriatric Andrews Sisters?"

"I'm here for the holidays, Mrs Edwards. Gran tried to phone you."
"I was busy. There was another one this morning, Vause Road."
"Another what, Mrs Edwards?"
"Cleaned them out. So stupid of people to go away and leave the house empty."
"What do you mean, busy?"
"I'm keeping a tally. Come in dear boy. It's over here."
"I really should..."
"Won't take a minute. Excuse the mess. It's been quite a day. Hector this morning. Daphne. And now this. It was on the news."
"Hector? Daphne?"
"Hector's dead. Daphne's gone out. She'll be back in a minute. Come over here. I'll show you the latest."
"It's a very big map. What's it of?"
"Here. The Berea. All those little flags are where it's been happening."
"Blue, Yellow, Green, Mauve..."
"They all mean something. Blue's housebreaking. Look this is where we are, right here. See that cluster? And there is Bellevue Road, just off Silverton Road. It's not very long, and somewhere there is where it happened this morning. I've put the flag in the middle until I find out exactly where. I suspect it's the Pellegrinis. They left three days ago. Number 37. I'll find out tomorrow."
"So many flags Mrs Edwards."
"As I said blue's housebreaking, yellow's murder..."
"A couple up there."
"And three down here near Botanic Gardens."
"Three over here, Mrs Edwards."
"Funny that. Just off Springfield Road. And none of them related."
"And green, Mrs Edwards?"
"Rape."
"1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 ..."
"You'll run out of fingers. Mauve's suicide. Orange, assault. I'm not bothering with child abuse and willful damage to property. One can't do everything. Spreading the net too thin already I sometimes think."
"It's amazing Mrs Edwards."
"Breaking and entering is what I like best."
"July 6th: May 21st September 29th ..."
"Times are all there too. It's important for the pattern, Etienne."
"Here's one from three years back."
"Daylight robberies are becoming more fashionable."
"Like this morning?"
"Exactly, Etienne. You don't just happen to fall into crime. You are educated into it. Kindergarten in Yellowwood Park. A bit of pilfering in Umbilo. Some bag snatching in West Street. And then it's time to graduate to bigger things."
"Sort of like going to high school, Mrs Edwards?"
"Exactly, dear boy. A bit of breaking and entering in Vause Road. A rape perhaps. Even a murder. Yes, they matriculate here on the Berea. It's rich pickings. There's so much to choose from and it's all here for the taking."
When the phone rings, my aunt ignores it.
"The phone, Mrs Edwards."

"It will be your grandmother. You'd better be going..."

"Shall I answer it?"

"It's bound to be her. Don't bother."

"Will you be coming down for a drink?"

"Say thank you to Edna. But I'm expecting Daphne back. She won't know where I am."

"Is that her coming in the gate now, Mrs. Edwards? I'm sure my Gran would like her to come too."

"No, I won't right now. There's quite a lot to attend to. I must see to Hector."

"Hector?"

"I feel dreadful. He's been there all day. And in this heat. Mildred will help me. And Daphne of course. Another time. Please say thank you to Edna for me."

Hector was her dog. That he was dead was certain, though when it happened was not. His body was in the garden and the temperature was hitting 30 and he'd been there all day which was not a pleasant thought. My aunt doted on him. I think she felt that not doing anything about burying him was a way of pretending he hadn't died. And she was sort of off-hand about him to Etienne, like it was something not very important, like a tap that was running or that she'd run out of tea or coffee.

She doted on him. Some people said that Hector slept in her bed towards the end, not on it, right in it. I don't believe it. He was not nice to be near with the problem with his right ear, sort of leaking pus. The vet called it something I can't now remember and there was some cream that she put on twice a day but it didn't help much. It was a blessing really. Seventeen. Seventeen times seven is a hundred and nineteen. A real mixture. A bit of this, a pinch of Dachshund, a touch of Jack Russell. Furry in places, smooth in others. Like an old carpet. Khelim mixed with that long haired shaggy stuff. Poor Hector hadn't had teeth for years. He'd lie on his side and lick the food from the floor. He couldn't really stand. Well not for long. He wobbled and then fell sideways. He could just drag himself along. She'd haul him around from room to room and then into her bed at night. Pathetic, really. It was a blessing, though of course she didn't see it that way.

"Tell me about Daphne, Gran."

"Her daughter. Two boys and a girl. She's the youngest. Charles and Raymond. Raymond's dead. It's been a bad year. Do you think I should ring again? I hate to think of her all alone."

"What about Daphne? She's there now."

"There was a terrible row earlier. Before you came. The omens for Christmas are bleak."

When night fell, Etienne said they should not turn on the lights so that they could watch the funeral in the garden.

"Mary's not tambourines and sandals. But good old fashioned stuff. Fire, brimstone and retribution. Incense and angels. She can quote chapter and verse for any ailment of the human condition. None of your new age simplicities for her, though she can manipulate the scriptures with the best of them. And I love her inconsistencies. Her contradictions make her very human. She's a good soul. I love her and hate her in equal measure.

"People come and go in her pantheon. She wrote a letter to the Daily News suggesting Winnie Mandela for President. If we're to have a woman I'd go for Helen Suzman. Or Patricia de Lille. But, no, she was all for Winnie. I sense she's about to be demoted, however, over something or other. Not banished. Well not yet. Mary has degrees of censure."

"Winnie's fine. Unpredictable. And that's what I like in someone. But I'd choose Richard Haslop for president."

"Which party, Etienne?"

"No, Gran. He's not a politician. He's got the most amazing taste in music and I think if we had more poets, and musicians, and dancers and writers and artists in Parliament, things would be a lot better. Richard Haslop has a programme on SAFM. You must listen, Gran, you really must. You'll hear music you've never heard anywhere before. Weird stuff. And only he knows what goes with what. Like he'll play some Saamis doing their chanting, then some Bedouins, then something from the Deep South, and so on. Amazing. This week he had THE DETROIT COBRAS, THE NEW PORNOGRAPHERS nothing to do with porn but a great name for a group, SILLY WIZARD, alternative Scottish folk music, THE FIERY FURNACES, a brother and sister punk group, BLACKMILK from Cape Town, THE SHINS, an avant garde group from New Mexico, and a semi-classical Spanish singer, JAVIER RUIBAL. He's eclectic."

"He sounds a bit advanced even for Mary."

"I'll tell her, Gran. Maybe not."

"Anyway to get back to Mary. The Archbishop is in right now – Tutu that is not Hurley. Hurley's always in. Tutu gets dumped occasionally, though he's more or less a fixture. It's what he said about the death penalty that's got him reinstated. 'A perverse way to show respect for life, and an absurdity that brutalises society.' The merest hint that you are for capital punishment and you are given the cold shoulder immediately. Unless of course she senses you are ripe for conversion. 'You can never call America civilised until...'"

"Gran, what's Sai Baba doing down there?"

"Oh, she's eclectic. There are many people in her pantheon. Krishna, Jesus, Gandhi. Mother Teresa was in, now she's out. Buddha comes and goes. I don't think she's mad about the Virgin Mary. Perhaps it's a woman thing – Mother Teresa and Mary. But she's all for women priests. And she's recently fallen for Kali so goodness knows how that old mind works."

"Kali makes sense. Blood, gore, death and destruction."

"Magdalene, the other Mary. She's got a soft spot for her."

"There's a clockwork thing on the mantelpiece, a sort of god thing, four legs and six arms, all holding different things, turning like a windmill, and out of its mouth there's this voice chanting. And there's a droning melody underneath and a tinkling bell every so often."

"Ah yes, her names of God in forty-eight languages. Ilos, Allah, Thios, Brama, Goed, Gott, Gud and Goth. And so on and so on. I forget the rest. She turns it on when she's in a state about something and it calms her down."

"The tune is sort of like a raga. Undulating like the sea on a calm day."

"I think it's out of favour right now. Ever since she met this woman in some temple over the other side of the Ridge who said that God has a hundred and eight names. She'd brought a garland she'd made with a hundred and eight hibiscus flowers as an offering and that really upset Mary's applecart. God had suddenly got bigger."

"That's nothing. The Hindus say God has a thousand names."

"Keep that to yourself, Etienne. Mary's got enough on her plate at present with Daphne."

"I know because it's part of our course on sound. AUM, you've heard of that Gran?"

"Can't say I have."

"Oh, it's fascinating, Gran. It's the original sound of the beginning of the universe, and it's God's name. It's the beginning of sound and so it's in a way, the father of music. "

"Really, my boy. How on earth did they find that out?"

"No, listen Gran. You spell it AUM. And if you split it up into three letters, your mouth does all the things it needs to do to make every other sound. The A is when the mouth is open to start making a sound. The U is to do with the tongue's movement and the M is the movement of the mouth as it closes."

"Really? Who ever would have thought that?"

"And every other sound you can make is between those two extremes. Between the A and the M."

"It's a funny old world. I suspect you and Mary would get on rather well."

"I wonder if she likes Indian music?"

"I have absolutely no idea. All sorts of weird stuff floats down through the ceiling. I've no ear for such things."

"I feel she might, Gran. It's very soothing."

"That's as may be. I'll stick to what I know."

"If she's so fond of God, I'm sure she would like it. It's the closest music there is to a spiritual experience you can get. Well at least I think so."

"In that case I'm sure she's tried it. She's nibbled at most of them."

"They even play it to plants and they grow better."

"That I find hard to believe."

"No, it's true Gran. They get more rice. And the cows give more milk."

"You'd better tell her yourself, my boy. She's fertile ground for odd ideas."

"I've brought a CD of Nishat Khan playing some ragas on the sitar. Do you suppose Mrs Edwards has a CD player?"

"She's ante-deluvian, perhaps, but not stone age, Etienne. I'm sure she has."

"And it's got the best tabla player in the world on it too, Kumar Bose."

"Really, Etienne. A tabla? Fancy that."

"An Indian drum you play with your fingers."

"Not drumsticks?"

"I got the CD from the university library. You can't buy it anywhere, Musica, Look and Listen, not even at C D Warehouse. Made in Calcutta. He's really famous. Plays concerts with Ravi Shankar. He travels all over the world. I read an interview. They asked him where he called home. 'Air India.' He's actually from Bangalore. But it's an old Calcutta family. Apparently lots of streets and places are called Bose. We're hoping to get him to come to South Africa to talk to us. IF we can afford him. Anyway, enough of that, please, Gran, tell me more about Daphne."

"Mary's hidden her past behind heavy curtains. Daphne's the youngest. 33. They're usually at war. Not strange perhaps for mothers and daughters."

"Quite pretty. Short-cropped hair. Denim and cotton. Unfussy."

"She's always leaving or returning. Vengeance, repentance, war, peace, truce and reconciliation are the stuff of their lives. Mary must have been a beauty. Well, let's say, could have been. You can just see traces of Daphne in her. But it takes some digging."

"You'd see it, Gran."

"Raymond. The middle one. He was the runt of the litter. God! He was ugly. Looked as if he had been put together from spare part surgery. A big head, Pekinese eyes. The short legs and arms of a Nigerian funerary carving. Square thickset body like a McNamees couch - overstuffed. But Raymond was her favourite. How she loved that boy."

"Was? Was? "

"Tragic. To lose a child must be the most difficult thing for a mother. Mary doted on him."

"Raymond must have had something."

"You would never say so just looking at him. And his clothes! From a car-boot sale. But, but, but and you won't believe this, he was a champion ballroom dancer. He was on television, S A Champion. He and his partner. She was only 16 when they first won it and everyone thought there must be something going on between them. But no. He said you must always keep the two things separate. The last time they won was when they held the Championships in Vereeniging. The prize was a ticket to London. He gave it to her. She went on to win the World Championships there. Latin-American I think, Cha-cha and Rumba."

"What happened to him, Gran?"

"He opened a studio just over the ridge, Manor Gardens Primary School Hall: nights and weekends. He did the advanced. His wife did beginners."

"But what happened to him?"

The rest of the story had to wait. It was not the first time that my aunt's tap lost its mind and began flooding the kitchen. Edna sent Etienne to help her.

"Would you mind if I asked you a question, Mrs Edwards?"

"Ask me and I'll tell you afterwards. Go ahead."

"Do you believe in life after death, Mrs Edwards?"

"Looking at some of my acquaintances, I sometimes question the notion of life BEFORE death. But to answer your question, yes of course I do."

"What makes you certain?"

"We'll never prove it. But that is the basis of faith. And by the time you have proved it, you have crossed the line and there's no turning back."

"Do you want to be very old, Mrs Edwards?"

"That depends. I want to be around when the Angel of Death comes to fetch me. I have no wish to be a bundle of washing in some nursing home bed helpless and devoid of thought. "

"Are you scared of dying, Mrs Edwards?"

"Someone once asked me that, and I said yes. And their next question was, 'for any particular reason?' "

"Once its done, do you think there will be something on the other side?"

"I have no doubt I'll find a place on a pink cloud and watch what's happening down below for ever and ever and ever. I only hope they don't ask me to play the harp. It's supposed to be a really difficult instrument. But seriously, Etienne, I know it is possible to have some control over your own mortality. It's been proved that people can keep themselves alive for special occasions. Like their hundredth birthday and then leave rather suddenly. Look at Irving Berlin. A hundred on Monday, gone before the weekend. And millions of people clung on against all odds until the millennium and then were dead by the middle of January. Yes, it IS possible to will yourself to keep living or to give up the ghost and submit."

"Tell me, Mrs.Edwards, tell me. How do you know?"

"This is hearsay, of course, but I've done some reading. I can think of two instances of people who knew precisely when they were going to die and had not one iota of fear. The first happened right here in Durban."

"Someone you knew, Mrs Edwards?"

"Knew of. I'd met her. An acquaintance, not a friend. And I wasn't there to witness the event, so it has to be hearsay. Doris Malan, a cousin of the woman, was at the bedside. Riddled with cancer, in enormous pain, but lucid to the end. They'd sent for her son from Cape Town on this particular afternoon as things were getting pretty bad, and various bits of the family were at the house. A sort of final vigil. Round three, Rowena, that was her name, Rowena asked when her son would be arriving as she could see the angels waiting for her."

"She could actually see them?"

"That's what she said. There was some delay with the plane, and half an hour later, Rowena asked again and said that she was anxious to leave as the angels were getting impatient. She said that she was getting impatient too as it looked such a wonderful place she was going to. She wanted to be on her way. Anyway, to cut a long story short, the son arrived round four. They all hugged and kissed and said goodbye, and Rowena closed her eyes and was dead."

"She was ready to die and wasn't afraid?"

"And I'll tell you about one other instance. And this I got from Mildred Naidoo. My PG."

"PG, Mrs Edwards?"

"Paying Guest. She lives at the back. Tenant, I suppose you call them now."

"In the kia, Mrs Edwards?"

"The garden cottage, yes. Anyway one day we are talking about just such things. I'm always fascinated to talk to people with such a long spiritual tradition, Hindus must go back right to the Creation or thereabouts, it is the oldest religion, and we were talking about reincarnation, kama and all that. Imagine coming back as an ant because you've done terrible things to your mother or whatever. I couldn't conceive of anything worse. Ants never sleep. Mind you a fish would be worse. They have no memory at all. They live entirely in the present. They have no recollection of what happened a moment back. No yesterdays, only today's. Not that Mildred is burdened by such concerns, she's a Catholic convert and she has enough on her plate with the Pope. I really do think the Catholics could have done better, but that's no concern of mine. Anyway she was telling me about a distant relation back in India. Well this man, let's call him a great uncle. Mildred might be a Catholic but she's saddled with this convoluted extended family. I forget his name right now but it will come to me, well he took a train from the mountains where he'd lived all his life, to Delhi, as he often did, to spend time with his son. Not a young man, I hasten to say. But fit as the proverbial fiddle. He was travelling with his daughter-in-law, but they were separated, she in the

women's compartment, he in the men's, as they still do in some parts there. She'd asked two people they'd met on the platform to keep an eye on him. During the journey, the old man had called the two young men over and told them that the time had come for him to die. They were made to promise they would perform the Hindu ceremonies and prepare his body, but were not to say a word to the daughter-in-law until they had reached Delhi."

"Go on, Mrs. Edwards. This is wonderful."

"Within half an hour he was dead. The two men kept their word. At Delhi they put the body on a chair and carried him through the crowds, but were stopped at the exit. His father, who had connections with the police, and who was there to meet the train, made a number of telephone calls, and they were allowed to continue."

"And, and?"

" 'Such things happen,' the son said, 'you know when the moment has come and you leave.' I love the matter of fact way he said it. But then India is a very spiritual place."

"Is that why you have Ganesh and Sai Baba on the sideboard, Mrs Edwards?"

"Perhaps. An insurance policy you could call it. Jesus, Buddha, Vishnu, they all have their moments. When one is cross, I use another. But in the end they are all the same person in different clothes."

Daphne and I didn't really know each other that well. Her life was in Johannesburg, mine here.

We were second or maybe third cousins of a sort. I called her mother, Aunt, but she wasn't a real aunt, though we were related nonetheless. It is too complicated to explain. Through my mother. Blood may be thicker than water but it is how you feel about someone that counts. Real relations, real flesh and blood ones, can be less important than some who are attached to you in a more tenuous way. It's all to do with who they are and how you feel for each other and about each other. I hardly saw Daphne while she was here over Christmas, but when I did I could sense that she was worried about her mother. When you don't see a person that often, the changes seem greater. But only for a while. That first impression lasts momentarily and then time seems to meet up with itself and it's back to normal. But that first moment, those first impressions are important, and I know that Daphne could see a time her mother would not be able to stay in the house forever. She didn't know then, of course, that it would be because of Auntie Edna that things would come to a head.

"Do you think my mother's getting worse, Edna?"

"We are none of us getting any better, Daphne. Worse in what way? I see Mary every day and she never changes."

"The place is a slum."

"It's not House and Garden."

"She uses one pot to cook everything and the washing up is done on Fridays."

"Have you seen the stove, Daphne?"

"Cobwebs in the oven. I can see you have problems here too. You've got the beginning of black moss there near the ceiling."

"The roof is a colander."

"You've told her?"

"Mr Haripersad came round the other day after the rains. 'What you need Mrs Edwards, is a new roof. It's only the paint holding the rust together.'"

"And?"

"He got an earful: 'I don't know how old you are Mr Haripersad, but this roof is as old as the house and the house is just three years older than I am.' I was there on the verandah, I heard

every word. "Who knows when the Good Lord will call me. I'm not prepared to spend money on a new roof for someone else to enjoy."

"A little work and this place could be really nice. I am with an estate agent now."

"Mary mentioned something."

"Mostly townhouses. Tuscan's very big in Johannesburg right now..."

"Really Daphne. How times have changed."

"As a tenant, Mrs Edwards, you have certain rights, and you're protected by law. It's all in the small print in your lease."

"Lease? You must be joking, Daphne"

"You mean ...?"

"Can you really see her bothering with things like that?"

"I really think you..."

"You are wasting your breath. Ours is a relationship based on trust. Or mistrust whichever way you look at it."

"She might be my mother, but if I were in your position..."

"No might about it, she IS your mother, and you are NOT in my position."

"Have it your own way."

"I'm beyond complaining. "Consider the lilies of the field" or some such is what I would get. Just look at this carpet. Mr Bell once valued it at fifteen thousand. He said the scatterings of the hot pinks in amongst the reds and purples was uncommon. Turkish I think he said it was. Each time it rains it takes a week to dry out."

"It smells like a moist dog ..."

"Talking of which ..."

"Hector? We gave him a proper burial."

"We caught the strains of "Abide with me."

"Closure. They say it helps."

"Closure?"

"Mildred's idea she's in the cottage at the back..."

"Yes dear. I know. I live here, too."

"Mildred Pillay?"

"Naidoo, actually."

"That's right. I am so bad with names. She's a convert, Catholic."

"Charismatic, and it's a room, not a cottage. Daphne."

"Mother refers to it as the cottage."

" ' A rose etc.' "

"I'd better be going Edna. I really just popped in to say thank you for the turkey."

"My pleasure. I hate to think of her not celebrating ..."

"Mother was wondering why you'd not put it in the fridge. It was sitting in a pool of water behind the couch. We came across it this morning. I hope it will be all right. This heat!"

"It's American, or Canadian. Probably it's mostly plastic. Indestructible."

"Plastic?"

"Forget it Daphne."

Etienne and my aunt really hit it off. That told me something about friendship. I liked Etienne at school, and we became best friends, and so it's not surprising that we would like the same things. My aunt was one of them. And I could draw up a list of things we didn't like and I'm sure we'd agree about that too. Our passions?

Swimming, of course. And surfing. He was better than me at both.

Elizabeth I. A clever lady. They say she spoke seven languages. I wonder what kind of accent she had. I know when I try to speak Zulu, it must hurt their ears.

Etienne played the piano. Classical things like Chopin and it sounded all right to me but they said he wouldn't ever make a concert pianist. His real love was weird music like Japanese and Red Indian. To listen to, not play. He has a huge CD collection. He has some chanting tapes from Korea which took some getting used to but when you did they were fine. I knew from school days

he'd go into music. He thinks he's going to be a composer. Not a performer. He's really creative. He says he's found the secret of art. One and one must never make two. Art can never be predictable. If something is, it cannot be art. It has its own logic. He says composing or making art is like dancing in the dark. You know you are doing it, but you can't see your body moving. And when he won this scholarship, it was as if it had been planned. I played the bagpipes. Highland Laddie is the first tune you learn. It's very uncomplicated. Junior league, not too many grace notes. It's the reels that are difficult. Like fast sprinting. Not the 4000 metres. Soccer – Manchester United. We didn't like Chelsea or Bafana Bafana.

But it was in history class that we both found we had this interest in obscure royal families. Not the usual ones. The last Queen of Hawaii who was deposed by the Americans when they took the place over. Liliuokalani. They say there is still a throne room there. And Queen Ranavalona III of Madagascar. When I was in Cape Town I saw a portrait of her in the National Gallery painted in 1911. We both find the minor royals much more fascinating than the big ones. The Kabaka of Buganda. Queen Salote. Not Liechtenstein. Too suburban. And he's got a soft spot for all the deposed ones, and all the pretenders.

"Did I pass the test, Mrs Edwards? How many people have liked that music first time?"

"With flying colours, Etienne, flying colours. Nobody ever the first time. Walton's an acquired taste like mushrooms, or blue cheese, or swimming in the Atlantic, or Beckett. It took me a while..."

"You had an advantage, knowing the Bible so well."

"Maybe it helped, but if God had done the music too, as well as the words, I'm sure He would have come up with something with more tune than Walton. No, Walton's not interested in writing background tunes for lifts or shopping in Musgrave Centre. He puts your teeth on edge. You sit up and take notice."

"He's not humming music. There's no point in writing humming music."

"Not too many tunes, you are right, Etienne. It's more a case of underlining the words. In strange colours. But tell me, Etienne, Daphne and your grandmother, have they been talking?"

"Talking, Mrs Edwards? About the musical? Has Gran mentioned it to you?"

"Yes talking. Discussing things? No, not the music stuff. I mean other things."

"Gran said Daphne had been there but I went down to the Ice Rink."

"So I wasn't wrong?"

"Gran's giving me skates for Christmas ..."

"Did she say what they discussed?"

"She didn't say anything. I didn't ask. Have you tried ice skating Mrs Edwards?"

"Anything about the roof?"

"Gran said nothing. There's a guy at the rink who gives lessons to beginners. R20 an hour. Think I should ask Mom and Dad for some for Christmas?"

"There's something underhand about Daphne. God knows where it came from. Her father probably."

"Is he dead, Mrs Edwards?"

"It is not a question I allow to trouble me."

"I'm sorry for asking. It was..."

"Don't apologise. Water under the bridge. Every family has skeletons in their cupboard."

"I don't think we have. Sadly."

"I'd not count on that."

"Really? Why?"

"Your grandmother's not told you about Gustav?"

"Grandpa Gustav? Often."

"Well, there you are..."

"She's got a photo of him and Phillip Tobias on the Chinese table. She's very proud of him."

"I wasn't meaning his archeology. Chinoiserie actually."

"Oh? What then?"

"Oh nothing. I'm sorry I mentioned anything."

"Come on Mrs Edwards you can't hint like that and not go on."
"Dear boy. It's not for me to say. My lips are sealed. You'll have to ask your grandmother."
"I will. I certainly will."
"Perhaps you'd better not."
"You've whetted my appetite, Mrs Edwards."
"I'd rather you didn't. Let sleeping dogs lie."
"Can I come and do an interview with you soon, Mrs Edwards.? For my project. I somehow think you are not one to let sleeping dogs lie."
"You are right, Etienne, my curiosity rules my life. And sometimes leads me down some bizarre paths. Interview? Edna was telling me something about something. You're doing a musical as a project, am I right?"
"And I have this weird idea I'd like to use the two of you in it."
"That really does spark my curiosity. Goodness knows how and what I could help with."
"So you agree, Mrs Edwards? Please say yes."
"Certainly, Etienne, take that for granted. But I'll impose conditions."
"OK, what?"
"Condition, actually. Singular. That you allow me to give you a concert when we've finished."
"I'd love that, Mrs Edwards. Are you going to sing? Or what?"
"I have an inkling, Etienne that you are a kindred spirit. Your reaction to Walton hints at deeper things. No, it won't be ME singing. I have treasures I've never been able to share with anyone. "
"Like what, Mrs Edwards?"
"Satie? Hildegard von Bingen? Cage? Early Stravinsky? Alban Berg?"
"It's a deal. Satie I know. Berg. Not Hildegard von Bingen. Nice name. I want to know everything."
"When do we begin, Etienne?"
"Do you know what an mbira is, Mrs Edwards?"
"Of course I do."
"Can you play it?"
"I used to try. There was a gardener up the road who had one. He was from Zimbabwe. Sometimes when I went past the house taking Hector for his walk he'd be playing it, and we'd stop and listen. When he was deported back to Zimbabwe, and to his death, it would not surprise me, his death, he gave it to me. Well, actually, I asked him if I could buy it and we did a bit of barter, I paid for his bus fare and he gave me the instrument."
"You still have it, Mrs. Edwards?"
"Somewhere. Don't ask me to find it. "
"I'll teach you. I'm not much good. I've only had a few lessons. But I'll teach you what I know."
"I'd love that, Etienne. I really would."
"Then we could do a duet. Give Gran and Daphne a concert."
"Edna's tone deaf. They'd not be much of an audience for us. We'd be squandering our talents I should think. And Daphne's all soft centres – Kylie Mingoue, Mantovani and P J Powers. Pearls before swine. I suspect we'd be better off without them. Edna would yawn, and Daphne would fiddle. Very distracting."

"As I was leaving, Gran, she went to a drawer and took out a file of papers. I saw Raymond's name on the outside. There were all sorts of things there, cuttings and photos and printed things that looked like certificates. She really loved him, I think, because she didn't want to talk about him. Well, eventually she found what she was looking for. 'Take this, Etienne and read it. It's something Raymond wrote. It was never published. He really did feel for people.' "
"You've got further with her in a few days than I have in years, Etienne."

"It's a woman thing, Gran. She trusts me."

"Perhaps it's an age thing. She really gets on with younger people."

Maybe, Gran. I'm not convinced."

"Not everyone, of course. Daphne's the exception there."

"A woman thing, Gran."

"A mother and daughter thing."

"You won't believe this, Gran, she likes Richard Haslop. Says that Sunday between three and four is a sacred time. "

"That explains something. Often wondered. She has a DO NOT DISTURB on her door. Funny how something that happens now can change something that has already happened. The past is like jelly. It keeps moving. It's never still."

"She's usually rung by now."

"Marjorie's dead."

"Dead? When? No you can't be right. I spoke to her yesterday."

"Monday. She died the day before yesterday."

"How did she look?"

"Like an Etruscan sarcophagus. Just the corners of her mouth curling a little. Quiet."

"I'm going to miss her."

She wouldn't. She'd soon forget she was dead. You need a memory to have regrets. Aileen remembered last week and the beginning of time, but not much in between.

When she was young and we were still in khaki shorts she had a car, a scarlet two seater Ford with a dickey seat. She used to take my brother and me for drives over the weekends to Benoni and Springs and Boksburg, dusty towns with minedumps, bluegums and distant relations. "You are either an alcoholic, or you go there to start a family, or you retire there. There is no other reason. No offence. There is nothing." Marjorie always came too. They were seldom apart. Disappointments had drawn them closer as the years passed.

Marjorie then was a big messy woman of forty-three in helanca stretch trousers and knitted tops. She'd been married three times and two of her four children had children of their own. Years later she still had the same pretty colouring, jade eyes and ink coloured hair that had a touch of red in the sun. When John Courtney left her she let herself go. There was nothing to stop her. She had drifted like a boat that nobody was steering, zigzagging her way through life. "Mr. Courtney gave off odours of death," Aileen used to say.

After that Marjorie seemed to swell up. Tiny eyes sunk like buttons in a plump cushion. Padded neck. Padded arms. padded legs, padded body. She cropped her hair so short it looked as if someone had taken a crayon and drawn on her skull in dark red.

"It's not going to be the same without her."

"You were very close."

"We could have been twins. I knew what she was thinking before she thought it."

There is a photograph of the two of them which always sat next to her bed. Two babies entirely made of white sausages, bigger ones and smaller ones. Next to them is a fox terrier with untidy spots, his pattern applied in a hurry. The picture is edged in two rows of cowry shells in herringbone formation, their tails pointing outwards, their backs tinted in pink nail varnish.

By the time Marjorie died she'd lost most of her colour, but not a lot of her bulk, a whitened mummy in olive organza freckled with white.

When I'd come to see Aileen this morning she was outside. I stood next to her on the sparse lawn. She was squinting upwards through the oleander at the builder on the corrugated iron roof. From the verandah the tin ceiling was a night sky of stars. Although she couldn't see, she knew it had as many holes as a sieve and she knew he didn't know she was almost blind.

"He's pretending he doesn't understand what I'm saying. Not that there is much English to spare. His teacher was probably a Cypriot with a harelip."

The garden was dry, the house was damp. Her carpets had been rained on so many times they smelled like a moist dog.

Flicking a hand at the man she snorted at me, "in the midst of life there is death".

She was wearing a navy straw hat trimmed with scarlet, the shape of a boater but smaller.

"You're all dressed up. Are you going out?"

"No, I've just got back. It was the dullest funeral I've ever been to. Oh for the good old days! No audience participation."

"Whose was it?"

"Nobody at all. Mrs. Robbins. No loss. She'd been hovering for months. As nervous as a sparrow."

"I didn't know her."

"She didn't know herself. The secret is not to let your brain nod off to sleep. It doesn't like being woken up again. There is nothing you can tell me about the flabbiness of the ancient mind."

Aileen had been a passionate gardener. She still clipped and dug and moved things about, but the garden was dispirited. A pair of crotons, one each side of the path. Four privets. A double row of salvia outlining the twin beds of begonias.

A pyramid of red earth on the trowel collapsed onto a shabby dog at her feet. She bent and patted it without thinking.

Lumps of cloud trundled across the horizon.

A spaniel poked its nose through the gate, sniffed the path, lifted a leg on a dead stump of Wild Cherry and wandered on.

"They can teach us a lot. Dogs I mean. They don't think, they just do. No regrets, no heartbreak. God's creatures."

"Shall I make you some tea?"

"I'd like that. I'll be in when I'm finished with the Wisteria."

The sky was speckled like the scales of a fish, yellow lines round scribbles of pink. It was a day of brightness and darkness. Inside I could smell the carpets. The geyser dribbled. It was the only sound.

"Would you take me to the beach," she asked "when we've finished our tea?"

You hate the beach."

"For Marjorie. She loved it."

The wind had blown itself out. Four surfers lay marooned on the flat water that breathed but hardly moved.

A line of silver sunlight cut the sky from the grey sea below.

Without it, water and air would blend into one.

"The wound won't heal. You know that. Don't you'?"

It didn't need an answer. I stared at the sea.

A drizzle, no more than a gust of mist, was making the sand a darker shade of ochre.

"If I could have opened her head and seen inside it would have been like a bundle of string the cat's played with. When she felt sad she'd come to the sea."

Birds strutted close to the water.

A woman in magenta slacks was collecting shells.

"Marjorie was an artist with shells - boxes, plates, tea-trays, even pictures. African scenes mostly. She wasn't good at portraits.

The waves were listless and oily.

We sat for a while saying nothing.

Aileen's fingers keep twisting like worms in a tin.

"No wonder I'm blind. My glasses are covered in butter."

When she turned her face I saw her eyes were moist.

"One more thing. That is if you have the time. Let's go and say hello to the family."

She'd grown fond of the cemetery and we'd often taken sandwiches and sat in the sun.

"Let's see Uncle Louis. He's over there under that bush."

The sandstone scroll was sinking in the pink granite chips. His letters were copper, weathered green. An S and a T were missing.

It was always the same circuit. Her mother was next, a book with open pages obscured with hen and chicken, an iris and two daisies.

Aileen's father was across the path. Above him rose an alabaster column twice the height of a tall man, broken at the top, wreathed in a chain with links the size of paperback books.

As she took off her hat when she got home she said nothing. And she was still silent when she dropped into her chair. She pulled her hair into a pile and pushed in three combs to hold it.

"When you begin to like the photos of yourself you once hated, you know you are old."

There was a woman layered in lace, a giant chrysanthemum, the lace very white, the hair very dark. The dress would have suited a younger woman better.

"Why do brides always look so odd? Except Marjorie. She was sensible. A beige suit."

She smiled, her face changing from angles to curves.

"Mr. Courtney was beige too. An accountant son of an accountant father from Kloof."

Her fingers like twisted driftwood grasped at the picture but caught only air. Tell me about Marjorie." "What can I say?" "How did she look?" "You saw her. She was sitting up in her chair in front of the television." "Yes, I remember." She'd forgotten already. "When was that?"

"The day before yesterday. You remember we had a phone call and went round straight away." "Yes of course."

The pattern of lilac and yellow leaves on the wall behind her vanished and the room turned dark. "How did she look?" "Happy. Not dead. Calm." "I hope she didn't suffer." "It must have been quick. The teapot was still warm."

After a silence she asked again. "Is it true that Marjorie has gone?" "On Monday."

"What was she wearing? It's important that I know."

"That dress with the big design. The one you said was like a curtain."

"Brown and green. I never liked it. Too Bernard Leachy. But then Marjorie was an artist." Aileen pulled herself up from her chair and looked out of the window.

Beyond the garden, lights were coming on in the black valley.

"They confiscated her life." "Who did?" "That family. Him. Mr. Courtney. As plain as a boiled egg but not as nourishing. I can still hear the whining voice and my mind fills with uncharitable thoughts." She paused. "What's going to happen to Arthur?"

"He'll be fine. Mrs. MacDonald is caring for him."

Arthur was a terrier of sorts. Marjorie had found him wandering in the streets one day and taken him home.

"They say it's a journey."

"Life?"

"Death."

"That too."

"I've packed my bags, booked my ticket and I'm ready to go. One way of course."

"Of course. Not return."

"Marjorie said she's waiting for me."

"Marjorie's dead."

"She didn't look dead to me. She's asked me to come."

"That's nice. When did you see her?"

"Last night."

"What did you say?"

"I told her I had a few things to attend to but I'd be leaving shortly."

"When?"

"Tonight, I should think. If the train comes."

"I can only give you love that lasts forever
And a promise to be near each time you call
And the only heart I own
For you and you alone
That's all, that's all.

I can only give you country walks in springtime
And a hand to hold when leaves begin to fall
And a love whose burning light
Will warm a winter's night
That's all, that's all.

There are those, I am sure, who have told you
They would give you the world for a toy
All I have are these arms to enfold you
And a love time can never destroy

If you're wondering what I'm asking in return, dear
You'll be glad to know that my demands are small
Say it's me that you'll adore

**For now and ever more
That's all, that's all."**

It sounds fine when you hear it sung. Funny that. You see the words written and they are flat. And even if you read them out loud there doesn't seem to be any music there. And unless you know the tune it's hard to believe that they will work. Song writers are clever. I couldn't take that and write a pretty melody to go with it. But I've heard my aunt sing snatches of it when she's been in the right mood and it's a little sentimental and lovely. It must have been special for her way, way back when. One of those songs loaded with memories that get under your skin and stay there forever. It was in a biscuit tin of photos she kept. Her second league pictures. Not the ones in the album. Not Raymond's. Not like that Hollywood one with the rings and the black cocktail dress and the marquissette brooch of a spray of tiny flowers on her left shoulder. These were her other life. Her failures I suppose you could call them. And these lyrics were amongst them, typed, not written.

Daphne was there as a child, and her brother Raymond, the one who died. And Charles.

"Oh. That's not my father. That's Uncle Richard. He was later, much later. It would have been Karridene 1980, '81. I would be, maybe, seven. My father had been dispatched to the mists of history by then."

"Uncle Richard?"

"I called him that, Etienne. I called all of them Uncle."

"All, Daphne, all?"

"He weathered many storms. I liked him. Some I hardly knew before they were banished. Mother could be restless. I liked Uncle Richard and I think she did too."

"Where is he now?"

"Not sure really. He sort of faded away. Perhaps he left Durban. It will come back. I think mother liked him. I say think because she never talked about how she felt. She never does about things that matter. Feels people ought to be able to cope."

"Who's this with no head?"

"Mr Potgieter. Raymond's father. He was never Uncle – Anyone."

"Raymond's dead?"

"Horrible. Horrible. Mother's favourite. Mother loved him so much. "Not one of nature's triumphs" someone once said. An understatement. Cruel. But so nice. So kind. He was S A Ballroom Champion Cha-cha and Rumba. And that with him is Natalie. His partner. She was World Champion Cha-cha and Rumba. They were S A Champions."

"You saw them dance, Daphne? You saw them dance?"

"Yes of course, often. They were in all the papers. T V. He taught me too. You should have seen him do the Tango. So sweet. He let me partner him once. Not a big competition. East London. Natalie was away. We came 3rd. My fault."

"Lots of people with no heads?"

"Mother's revenge. Retribution. If she didn't like the shot she was like the Black Queen. Look. Here she is. She'd been on one of those miracle diets. Grapes and cider vinegar, or something. She loved this dress. See how trim she is? It's the one she married Uncle Victor in. "But my face is so pinched," she said, "Belsen." Out come the scissors."

"Victor? Who was he, Daphne?"

"Charles' father. Benoni '76. Bottom of the barrel. Way before my time, Charles was not nice. Not nice at all. I never forgave him for what he did."

"What DID he do?"

"Oh. It's a long story. Too long. Too sordid. Let's draw a veil ..."

"And this woman, dressed like a Chrysanthemum?"

"Mother again. What we called her "Italian period." Uncle Rossi. Augusto Leonardo Rosselini. He had a flat in Bon Accord. Huge. Italian marble everywhere. Venetian glass chandeliers,

Majolica pots, ruched satin curtains. A cocktail cabinet with angels and horses, something like St. Marks. And Mrs Rosselini. He was sent to the guillotine swiftly when mother found out.”

“Nice suit.”

“Uncle Rossi was nice too. Took us to Scottburgh in his Alpha Sports. He had a flat in Ballito too. His retreat from Mrs Rosselini.”

“You’d never guess, such an adventurous past, seeing her today.”

“Mother had an instinct of choosing the wrong men. What was it she used to say? Let me think. Yes. She used to say, “certain things are instinctive: good taste: a fear of crawling insects and backing the wrong horse.” I wonder if she typed that song, or if someone gave it to her? No use asking. She’d say, “what tune? Never heard it.” “I can only give you love that lasts forever...” sad really. And those “country walks in springtime.” I hope she got them from one of them.”

**“There were bells on the hill
But I never heard them ringing
No I never heard them at all
‘Till there was you**

**There were birds in the sky
But I never saw them winging
No I never saw them at all
‘Till there was you**

**Then there was music and wonderful roses
They tell me their sweet fragrant meadows of dawn and dew**

**There was love all around
But I never heard it singing
No I never heard it at all
‘Till there was you.”**

“It’s a very touching story, Mrs Edwards. I read it straight away.”

“You can sense that Raymond had a soul can’t you Etienne? Such a precious child.”

“I hesitate to ask this, Mrs Edwards, and you can say no, and I will understand, and will never ask again...”

“What is it, Etienne?”

“Would you think it at all possible that I could adapt bits of the story for one of the scenes in my musical? I’d be very sensitive in the way I’d use it. I know how precious it is to you...”

“You must have been reading my mind, Etienne. You fell for my little ploy hook line and sinker.”

“Really, Mrs Edwards? How?”

“It’s the only thing he ever wrote – apart from school essays and geography projects. And history of course. That sort of thing. No scope there for his imagination to find wings.”

“It IS very beautiful...”

“Call me sentimental, but I take it out and read it each year on the anniversary of his death. Like a prayer...”

“I can imagine...”

“And since you have been here, an idea has been hovering. Is there a way of doing something with it that will give it a new life? Goodness knows how or what I’m thinking about. It’s not my field. But perhaps, perhaps, there might be something you could do with music?”

“Yes, Mrs Edwards, yes. Please let’s try.”

“Now you’ve read it, Etienne, you know the mood. It’s all about regret and loss. It’s melancholic.

Wistful. What kind of music comes into your head after reading it?"

"Something dark. Not too dark. Not Gothic and spooky. Brooding. Spiritual."

"Yes, Etienne, I feel the same. But what instrument would you use to get that?"

"The saxophone. It has these deep brown notes. Yes, the saxophone."

"You surprise me. I'd never have thought about that."

"Then what, Mrs Edwards? I love the saxophone."

"The cello?"

"The cello could work."

"It's is such a heart-rending instrument, melancholy, sombre, deep, dark and brooding."

"I know what you mean, Mrs Edwards. Elgar. Bach. "

"What's her name and Yo Yo Ma."

"Jacqueline du Pre? And instead of someone singing, we could have the words being spoken with just a melody on the cello underneath. But it would have to be the right voice. We'll find someone. Some very old people's voices crackle like the notes of a violin. Wouldn't that be special? A duet? A conversation? Mrs Edwards. I have an idea. I'm hopeless at the violin but it's worth the try if you can put up with it, and you can read. Let's see what happens."

"We've nothing to lose. In for a penny... Off you go. I'll get us coffee. We'll need it. I got Lavazza to impress Daphne. She's not here so I'll impress you instead."

"It's not a great violin either. I found it in a secondhand shop in Yeoville. No that was my mbira. Edenvale. Not a Stradivarius or anything. Not even a second cousin. And I'm no Nigel Kennedy. In fact I'm pretty hopeless. But it's just the two of us, and I hope, Mrs. Edwards, that I won't embarrass you."

"At my age, Etienne, I am beyond most things, embarrassment included."

Auntie Edna and Etienne were well matched. There were things she would talk about, and things she avoided. He would not give up. He was as persistent as she was cagey.

"I'm not sure what I can tell you will be any use for your musical."

"Oh it will. Let's start with the Middle East. You choose the place, Gran. I have a feeling for some of those traditional sounds from there. It's such a funny mixture. I suppose that's why they call it the Middle East. A sort of crossroads. East Meets West and all the other cliches. But it doesn't have to be Hollywood. So, Gran, please begin anywhere."

"Your grandfather and I visited such adventurous places digging up the past. Such a world of curious people. Academics! There was this wonderful professor in San Diego – Gustav gave a paper there on Mrs Ples – had lived for two years on nothing but nuts, filtered water and bay leaves."

"And?"

"I forget now. It did nothing for his appearance. Quite a frightening looking man, hair sprouting out of every orifice. But he swore it stimulated whatever waves you have in your brain. Beta is it?"

"The Lebanon. Tell my about the Lebanon, Gran."

"Beirut! Bombed to oblivion now, but then ... We climbed Mount Lebanon with all our things strapped to our backs. We climbed and climbed the air getting thinner and thinner. We were gasping. But that perfect silence. You could believe you were the first person ever to have been there. All rather biblical."

"Grandad was digging for something?"

"Good Heavens no. Not at 2000 feet. Archeology's in the valleys. We went skiing."

"Did you skate?"

"Skating is ice. Skiing snow. Let me think. There's a picture of us."

"Show me, show me, Gran. "

"In that drawer over there. Not anything like Switzerland today. All those nouveau-riche nobodies pretending their mothers were duchesses. It was primitive and real. Here it is. We are standing near the bottom of the slopes amongst the anemones on the fringes of the snow."

"And who's that with you and Granddad?"

"I forget her name. Some woman Gustav met."

"Quite glamorous."

"HER mother was no duchess. Can you see how the snow starts quite suddenly?"

"Grandma, you are hiding something."

"I'm sure Mount Lebanon is one gigantic resort today with snowploughs and ski-lifts and chalets."

"Grandma. Please."

"Etienne I said no."

"Thank you for keeping an eye on the ogre up-stairs, Edna."

"It was lucky I was in, Daphne."

"She gets so carried away with her murders and rapes, they could steal the house and she'd not notice."

"All it needed was a little wind and we could all have been cremated like Buddhist monks."

"These houses would go up in three minutes flat."

"I'd just poured myself some guava juice and was sitting on the verandah with a ham and tomato sandwich when I smelled this strange smell."

"You get acrid whiffs of it still here are there in the corners."

"I looked up and saw smoke coming from her room. Not like a chimney. Thin strands like a bundle of black cotton."

"She said how you came up waving your arms like a windmill."

"She was on her way to the shops with that patchwork bag over her arm. It was quite a struggle getting her to turn around and go back. Like an angry dog snarling at me."

"Bossy, she called you."

"Bossy? Daphne, her bed was on fire. That silly clip-on reading lamp had buried its face in the pillow. No flames. But glowing like charcoal."

"More people die from the smoke inhalation than from the flames. It's part of my job to warn people."

"She panicked. She grabbed bits of burning rubber – the mattress had started by now – and began running about throwing them like confetti, out of the window, onto the carpet, some onto the sofa. It was touch and go."

"She's too old to be left by herself."

"She's too pig-headed to admit it."

"You're an angel Edna."

"Not at all. Enlightened self interest, Daphne dear. We are joined at the hip. Geriatric Siamese twins trapped on a sinking ship."

Enlightened self interest was Daphne's motive too. There would come a time when her mother would not be able to carry on in the house. A tiny Tuscan granny cottage in their tiny Tuscan garden? Harbour Lights on the Berea or Mon Repos in Greyville, close to her friends, close to the shops, on the bus route was not an unattractive idea.

"It's no use Daphne. I can't see myself in one room in the Village of Happiness."

"You are twisting my words."

"The sensible thing is an old age home but I've never been sensible and I'm too old to learn."

"It's not what I was suggesting and you know it."

"I visited Mary Stafford the other day. She's in Kingsleigh Home for the Aged across the freeway. They've allowed her her own table as a special concession. And she has her own bookcase and her bentwood chair. And a couple of pictures. The rest is their standard old lady issue stuff. And she had such beautiful things. It must have broken her heart saying good-bye to them."

"It's no use, mother, no use."

"My possessions are my emotional props. Life hasn't exactly been a bed of roses. Surely one is entitled to some reward in one's latter days?"

"I cannot go on talking to the terminally obstinate."

"All you want to do is rush back to your nice little Tuscan Village and leave me to rot in some Godforsaken Golden Age Home or Village of Peace."

"Strength. Strength. Good Lord give me strength."

"I refuse to divest myself of what little I have. My life is more or less reduced to a suitcase as it is."

"Good God. You'd drive Jesus to drink."

"Blasphemy Daphne, is a sin. 'I lift up my eyes unto the hills from whence cometh my strength...'

"Calm down, will you mother, and listen."

"How long must your servant wait? When will you punish my persecutors? The arrogant dig pitfalls for me...'"

"I need a drink. I'm going downstairs to Edna."

"Whenever it gets a bit uncomfortable, you escape."

"Some Christmas this is going to be."

"As a penance, Daphne, I do Mon Repos on Thursdays. Mon Repos Home for the Aged."

"You are earning your wings, Edna."

"It's not entirely altruistic. It strengthens my resolve to keep going. This may not be heaven, but that, Daphne, is undoubtedly hell."

"Mother will fight until the flaming chariot swoops down to fetch her."

"They are an unjolly lot. Priscilla Naidoo in No 7 has a wandering mind. She asked me on Thursday if I'd put her off at Mitchell Park. "I'll tell you when the bus gets there," I said. She said "thank you," closed her eyes and began snoring. Doris Ndlovu next door has Emphysema and only stops squeezing her pump when she lights up another cigarette. Then there's Hannah Rogoff in 5. Asthma. She whoops and wheezes and then goes silent. The blood drains from her face and we all think she's crossed over."

"You are brave, Edna, you really are. I wouldn't have it in me."

"It's salutary: A warning. I think they should give us all a pill when we get to seventy. But there's worse further down the passage. Patience Ndebele had a massive stroke three weeks ago. 6.5 on the Richter Scale. Her tenth in five years. It's left her face up one side, down the other, and when she tries to speak it's as if her mouth is covered with a blanket. Mrs Hepplewhite has lived in a perpetual present since her memory vanished. She's agile and sparkling. Dresses immaculately each morning and sits brightly from breakfast to dinner at the front door, hat, handbag and occasionally an umbrella waiting for someone to arrive to take her to town. "

"And do they arrive?"

"Of course not. It's in her head. Can I top up your drink?"

"That would be lovely."

"Nurse Moodley – she's in Frail Care – said that the night before was like the zoo with all the noise. Prya Chetty was up all night banging on her door screaming that she was been chased by a monkey. Mrs van Zyl - she's 94 - kept pressing her bell, and when nurse got there pretended to be asleep. Blossom Perkins wet her bed five times and had to be changed and Marjorie Rogers sang hymns intermittently from 2am to 5. Was that the gate?"

"Yes. Expecting someone?"

"That will be Etienne. He's bringing us Kentucky Fried. You get the plates, I'll get us another drink."

"His body was discovered, Daphne, in the morning when Prettiness arrived. They said there had been a struggle. There was a table, I think or a chair, something anyway, overturned in the entrance hall."

"I never saw the flat, Edna."

"The scatter rugs were all over the place, Daphne, and a cane chair in the bedroom was on its side."

"Musgrave Heights is not the kind of block one would associate with murders. It's not Gillespie Street or Point Road."

"People get murdered all over Durban, Daphne."

"Of course it's silly thinking that way, Edna. But if it were on my books, the location, the security, the night watchmen, the intercom, all that: I'd make that a selling point."

"And on the tenth floor. How did they get in?"

"Don't suppose they'll ever get to the bottom of it."

"Apparently, Daphne, the whole of the tenth floor put in Trelidors the next day. Seuntjie, Hilda Malan's son got the contract. He works at the factory. Says they were rushed off their feet."

"I keep wondering if Raymond and Sonia had still been together it wouldn't have happened."

"Mary says the same thing."

"Fortunately I didn't have to involve her in the identification. Imagine the trauma. Imagine what it's done to her."

"But there was nobody else. Sonia was out of the country ..."

"I still can't help it. I blame her ..."

"They say the walls were speckled with blood, Daphne. And there was a stain like a large red spider on the side of the counterpane where his head must have brushed as he fell."

"Do you think my mother's all right?"

"She never talks about it, Daphne. Like it never happened."

"You never know what's really going on in that old head."

"The really important things stay bottled up."

"She's obsessed with murder and rape and people getting bludgeoned casually by strangers. Hijacking and robbery."

"But not Raymond."

"Funny that, Edna."

"Not really. We're all like that, Daphne. It's protection. We don't want to expose ourselves."

"Not to the world. That I understand but I'd have thought she could talk to you, Edna."

"She's never mentioned it, Daphne."

"I wonder how Sonia feels."

"There were no kids, Daphne?"

"There was some problem, on her side, Edna. Something deeply gynaecological. I really don't know."

"They'd not been separated long?"

"A couple of weeks ..."

"And you, young man, what do you think?"

"I'm just listening. Taking it all in. I think you should leave her alone. Both of you. Gran, you. And Daphne too."

"Nobody's putting pressure on her."

"And Gran, please don't call me that."

"Sorry my boy."

"Or that either. I like Mrs Edwards. I really do. Everyone's different. Everyone must do things the way that feels right."

"I could not agree more."

"Then why don't you leave her alone? Both of you. Gran and Daphne. You are forever talking about her behind her back. Saying she must do this or that. She's old but there's nothing wrong with her."

"That's rather unfair. We're only trying to help."

"She's not a child. If you really want to help, leave her alone."
"Has she said something to you, Etienne?"
"Not at all, but I notice things, Gran. And she does too."
"I suggest we change the subject. Daphne, you'll have coffee?"
"If it's Koffiehuis, count me out."
"You Johannesburg snobs! Really. Lavazza. Koffiehuis indeed!"
"OK then."
"Etienne?"
"A Coke please Gran."

"He used to paint, Etienne."
"What, did he paint, Daphne?"
"Funny how some people get all the talent. It's not fair. I was at the back of the queue."
"Did he have lessons?"
"Raymond? No, he was a natural."
"I never understand when people say 'I can't draw a straight line.' What's that got to do with anything? They say it all the time. It's such a cliché."
"I'm sure Raymond could have. Palette knife was his best."
"Has Mrs Edwards got any?"
"Just the one. Near the kitchen door, Etienne. The forest scene with the light coming through the leaves and the snowdrops."
"Oh that."
"Why do you say it that way?"
"Nothing"
"Cape Scenes. Mountains. Fishermen's cottages. Flower sellers."
"People?"
"No, never people. Said they didn't suit his style. I mean not portraits."
"I think the frame's too fancy, Daphne."
"He's even better than Tinus de Jongh. And more modern."
"Did he paint abstract?"
"Sometimes. Raymond could do anything. It's not fair. He could do anything. And I was such a dunce. Still am. At some things. Someone in the factory did his framing."
"I get it."
"They used to make fibreglass fishing rods. I agree about the frame, Etienne, now that you mention it. "
"As long as Mrs Edwards is happy. It's her painting. It's got sentimental value."
"She's never said anything about it."
"It's like a religious relic for her. Reminds her."
"Raymond was planning to start making bulletproof vests."
"That's ironic, Daphne."
"You have to diversify if you want to stay on top. I know that from the estate business. I do townhouses, and flats, and I'm beginning to get a foot in the door of professional office space. Dentists. Lawyers. A toe, really."
"I once saw a man get killed. It wasn't like on television. It was ordinary. And quick, and not very messy."
"I've never seen another dead body in my life and I don't want to. I hate death, Etienne. Do you believe there is another life?"
"There was a fight in the lane behind our house. They chased him in there. Stabbed him. Took his wallet. The next day the blood was baked black by the sun. Like enamel. Three months later you could still see it. Though you wouldn't have noticed if you hadn't known."
"I'm terrified of death."
"My Grandfather would have noticed the bloodstain. He was an archeologist you know."
"I know. Mother told me."

"I think he had an affair."

"What makes you say that?"

"Just things. I'm putting two and two together. Something Mrs Edwards said, and then yesterday my Gran got all-strange about a photograph. She was telling me about Beirut, for my university project. There was this very glamorous woman standing next to Grandpa Gustav. And she changed the subject."

"That makes sense. Mother once told me how Edna had had her own cross to bear. Something about an actress. I forget now. Loyalty. Turning a blind eye. That sort of thing."

"Go on. Ask her. Please Daphne. Please. Will you? Promise?"

"Why not? I'll ask her, of course I will, Etienne. Not that I'll promise anything. She's like a terrier with a bone if she's guarding something."

"Gran won't speak of it. I'm just curious. I love digging up the past."

"It must run in the family."

"Never thought of that. Promise you'll ask? Please, Daphne."

"All I can do is try."

"Please, Daphne, please. It's important. I could use it in the plot. Love interest. The other woman. I know it's a cliché and all that. But that's what makes it so good. I can almost imagine the music already. It would have overtones of Lebanese music. Could be very haunting. Of course I wouldn't use their real names. I'll disguise them. Please, please, Daphne, you must get it out of her. I need it, I really do. It would add spice to my musical. It really would."

"I'll try, Etienne."

"Not that it's a conventional musical. I want to do something revolutionary."

"Mother said something about it."

"But love is eternal, and all that. A cliché perhaps. But it's necessary as an ingredient. It's how you use it that makes the difference."

"Mother will see to that. Nothing conventional about her."

**"Are the stars out tonight?
I don't know if it's cloudy or bright
'Cause I only have eyes for you, dear**

**The moon may be high
But I can't see a thing in the sky
'Cause I only have eyes for you**

**I don't know if we're in a garden
Or on a crowded avenue
You are here, so am I
Maybe millions of people go by
But they all disappear from view
And I only have eyes for you."**

"She sets no store by material things, Etienne, your Mrs. Edwards. Mary. I set every store by them. She's the spiritual one. She's given up on me. Thinks I'm beyond salvation."

"You've got some lovely things, Gran."

"I'm downstairs, but nonetheless, I'm not quite as close to heaven as Mary upstairs, but there's not much in it."

"Upstairs, downstairs."

"She'll go straight there. I'll hover a century or two in Purgatory: Mary's a good soul."

"I like her a lot, Gran. I really do."

"Possessions for their own sake are nothing. It's the associations they have that make the difference."

"I don't think you'd call Mrs Edwards houseproud."

"Every single thing on that Chinoiserie table over there is a memory. And in that cupboard. Everything has a story. I learned so much from your grandfather. He could take a little bit of bone and just by looking at it tell you what the poor creature had eaten the day it died. Fascinating."

"OK, Gran, tell me about this photo of Grandad in front of this wall with all the pictures on it."

"Near Jaipur. 1987. Your grandfather and I met a pixie of a man who had done lots and lots of research amongst folk artists in what he called 'the deepest, deepest country,' by which he meant amongst the Indian tribals. He's that little man with the big glasses in the white pajama suit."

"He's got more teeth than a 54 Cadillac."

"A real charmer. A wizard with words, but breath as foul as a Bombay sewer. These people he was studying could neither read nor write, and showed not an iota of interest in either. But their heads were overflowing with pictures which went back to the dawn of creation."

"Did he speak English, Gran?"

"Most eloquently, Etienne. He really did have a most poetic turn of phrase. Now I must get this right, he said, 'These artists are the true keepers of the spirit. Long may their tiny lamps flicker.' "

"Sounds like a poet."

"You are quite perceptive, Etienne. Indeed he did write poetry, but he was no Shakespeare. He gave your grandfather a tiny volume which must still be somewhere."

"Please find it, Gran, perhaps I could steal some of them as lyrics, and do the music."

"When you read them, you might not be as enthusiastic. However, to get back to what I was telling you. He'd met a woman, one of the tribal women. No education. Illiterate. Couldn't tell an A from a B, or whatever their equivalent might be, an indecipherable squiggle I imagine. Probably written backwards, right to left. But bright as a button. All in her head. Part of that great oral tradition. Mother to daughter, mother to daughter, for three thousand years. Never through the males."

"Never heard of that."

"Oh, not a general rule, Etienne. It was specific to this particular tribe. I suppose you'd call it a tribe? Sounds sort of demeaning. Primitive."

"Tribal and tribe go together, Gran. Factual, not demeaning."

"Anyway, Etienne, this old woman – and you are right, she had had no education but she had a very aristocratic bearing. Where was I? Yes, she told the most astonishing stories about the creation of the world. Forget Hubble, forget Newton, forget Genesis. Her secrets were an unbroken thread to the dawn of time. He asked if he could record her on tape. 'You will carry my voice anywhere you like? No I can't give you permission.' She then wanted to know if the tape would last forever and her voice would go on even after her death. 'No I can't give you my voice.' But she and her friends painted a mural for him using berries and juices from vegetables for colour, and twigs for brushes, one end beaten with a stone into soft hairs. As the sun began to disappear, they stood in a row and looked at their masterpiece. 'We have given food to the wall.' "

"That's a wonderful line. And a wonderful story. Do you think I could use that in my musical? It would make a marvellous scene, these women painting the picture on the wall. I'd make them sing while they were working."

"It's possible they sang. He mentioned nothing about that."

"OK, Gran, the next object. I really like this game. What about this fan with the fancy handle?"

"That's the Bay of Rangoon. Painted by hand exquisitely, on silk. Oh, it's not precious. Two a penny. Ivory I suppose. He'd been on a dig. Cambodia or some Godforsaken place, and bought it for me for our wedding anniversary 25 or 27. I forget now. He sent me a postcard of the same scene. At sunset. It's tied up somewhere in one of the bundles."

"This necklace?"

"Amber. Peru, '65. You'll see, if you hold it up to the light, tiny insects, millions of years old."

"The cocktail shaker, Gran. Tell me about it. It's not like the usual Art Deco ones. Much more fancy."

"The Pendennis Castle. Our last trip before they stopped the mail boats. He went to give a paper at the Royal Society. Very grand. They put us up at a charming hotel near Piccadilly. Not the Ritz. But not far from it. But enough of that. Let's have some tea. It's close enough to Christmas, let's cut the cake."

"You mean it, Gran?"

"Of course."

"You mean it, Gran? You always keep it for Christmas Day. Afternoon."

"Etienne?"

"Yes, Gran?"

"I'm leaving all this to you."

"What do you mean Gran?"

"Everything. It's all yours."

"But what about ... ?"

"Your mother? You know the saying about grandparents and grandchildren being united against the common enemy?"

"No, I've never come across it."

"Well, now you have, let's say no more about it."

"But Gran ..."

"No buts. The kettle's boiling. You make tea. I'll get the cake."

"OK. Gran."

"There are lots of things you ought to know. Things I don't want to talk about, now. When the moment is right. But that will be after I've gone. They are all there. Bundled up. Their lips are sealed, Etienne. Their lips are sealed."

"But Gran ..."

"We all have our cross to bear. Mary's line not mine. And I'm no exception. And when you get older, you'll have yours too."

"But Gran ..."

"No, listen to me Etienne. Everything is in its own good time. If I were Mary I'd have it at my fingertips. What is it "A time to sow and a time to do whatever it is you do after sowing? ..." You are all I have. And I know you appreciate things. Your grandfather was a wonderful man. He opened my eyes to the world. But I won't pretend we didn't have our differences. Now is not the time, nor the place ... one day ... let me live with my sorrows. I can deal with them. There were more good times than bad and I'm not prepared to spoil them for a moment. Perhaps one day, you'll turn into a writer. Your grandfather left wonderful journals. And all his letters. Everything is there for you. It was not in his nature to throw a single thing away. At times I felt it a curse. That woman: I was tempted to consign it all to the flames. Tempted too to read them. I'm glad I resisted. But his letters to me I treasured. Every single one. He had a way with words. Each day, without fail, when he was away – and his work took him away often – each day he wrote to me. I felt I was there with him. And I still do."

"Hi Etienne ... Can you talk? Sorry this is a bad line. Want me to call you back. Ok. You can hear. ... Yes, mother's in the garden ... Listen ... I have got the most amazing news to tell you what we talked about yesterday ... It wasn't easy dragging it out of mother ... No ... She's like a terrier with a bone. Won't give it to anyone else ... but you said you wanted to know ... Listen I really worked at it. She's obstinate. I'm persistent ... In the end she gave in ... like a house of cards or whatever ... total collapse ... I've got the whole story ... everything ... and once she started there was no stopping her ... Etienne, I don't get it ... yesterday you wanted to know everything ... what's happened? ... Well, something must have happened to change your mind ... Okay. I won't go on ... but I'm telling you, you are missing something really good. Okay, bye."

"Nice Ramesh thinks he can make a plan about the roof, Edna."
"Mr Haripersad, Mary?"
"He has an uncle in Verulam whose son-in-law knows someone in that place out at Springfield or Sea Cow Lake that has the demolishers..."
"Atomic Demolishers?"
"Something like that. They can get second-hand corrugated-iron sheets, which are almost as good as new at a very special price."
"You don't think you'd be throwing good money after bad, Mary?"
"Ramesh will guarantee it. Personally, Edna,"
"In writing, Mary?"
"I might be old-fashioned but a person's word is good enough for me."
"Didn't he do the gutters in '98?"
"Hardly his fault. The supplier let him down. I saw the invoice."

"Mrs Edwards, they were giving these out on the corner. I went across to get us an ice cream at Steers."
"Etienne, have you seen my glasses?"
"Over there. On the stove."
"Of course. Now let me see."
"Shouldn't you turn it down? It's boiling over."
"The right hand knob. Etienne, where would I be without you?"
"I've really liked being here, Mrs Edwards. You'll be fine. I heard Daphne asking Gran to keep an eye on you."
"Indeed."
"Now let's see what this says. 'Moosa's Fabric World. Year-End Sale. Upholstery and Curtaining at below cost.' Very nice indeed."
"I thought so too."
" 'Cretannes. Brocades. Velvets. Glazed cotton.' And they make up curtains at no extra cost."
"Only if you buy 20 metres or more."
"We'll work it out."
"You said Mr Haripersad's wife has a sister who sews?"
"Bridal wear. She's a specialist. Lulu Lala. A talented family. And matric ball gowns. Debutante dresses. No, it's her sister-in-law in Phoenix who does curtains. Leela Mukerjee. Her style's a bit above our station. Flounces, tiebacks, swags and tails, two-tone quilted pelmets, bull-nose pelmets, shaped pelmets, padded pelmets, fringing. We should be less ambitious here on the Berea. We'll settle for Moosa's. And chintz."
"Overport's close..."
"Just up the road and down the other side. Brickfield Road."
"Can we walk?"
"Yes. But no. It's summer."
"I've noticed. The flowers are dying."
"Yes. Even the Wandering Jew has stopped wandering. We'll not tempt providence, lest we too succumb. We'll get a minibus. Say nothing. This is between us and nobody else."
"I know, Mrs Edwards, my lips are sealed."
"Surprise is always the best tactic in war. Keep the enemy guessing. Churchill."

"Goodness me! What's the happy occasion?"

"Happy occasion, Mary?"

"Edna? Daphne? One doesn't have to be psychic to know something is going on."

"Some tea, Mary? I can top up the pot. The kettle's ..."

"I'll get it out of you. Sooner or later. You might as well tell me."

"I just popped up to see Edna about ...ummmm."

"The Queen of the Night. Did you see it flowered?"

"Your faces have guilty written all over them."

"Go on Daphne, you'd better ..."

"It looks as if I'm ..."

"Pregnant?"

"Mother? You knew?"

"Instinct. I've not been a mother three times over without developing a certain sense."

"I don't know what to ..."

"Goodness gracious. I really thought it was something serious."

"It's gone too far to ..."

"I came up to tell you the latest horrors. Lawrence Avenue. Last night. Leigh-Ann Sherman – God how I detest these new names, Cindy-Lou, Tracey-Jane, Kimberley, Taylor, Tarryn – well, she was parking the car in the garage. She's got one of those automatic doors. When three men brandishing guns followed her in. Terrifying. She refused to open the window and they kept banging, and pointing their guns at her. She just kept her hand on the hooter. They were after Mervyn's stuff. He's a photographer. The house is wall to wall computers and cameras. She just sat there in panic making this din."

"I heard it. Just up the road? Round 11.30?"

"Yes. Meanwhile Mervyn was in the pool. Remember how hot it was? I suppose the noise of the water. And him splashing about. He said to the police he heard the sound but thought it was down the road."

"She's that pretty girl? Works at the Daily News or Mercury or something, Mary?"

"Mercury. Often works late. Sub-editors have a terrible life."

"How is she? What happened, Mary?"

"Shaken to the marrow, if that's where you get shaken to. But otherwise unscathed. Eventually when Mervyn got out of the pool, he realized what was happening. The Flying Squad was there in three minutes."

"Did they get them?"

"Of course not, Mary. Vanished into the night. So, Daphne, I'm to be a grandmother."

"At last."

"It will take some getting used to."

"Me too. I had other plans for next year. The Institute Exams ..."

"And Roy?"

"He'll be surprised too."

"I suppose one can telephone Hong Kong? It's not been on my list of things to do ..."

"Thank you Mom. He'll be back next week ..."

"Mom? That's the first time you've called me that. Too many surprises in one day."

"Did anyone see that amazing flower downstairs?"

"Queen of the Night. One night a year only. It flowers for one night. This morning it's hanging like a limp fish. Did you smell it, Etienne?"

"Yes, like peaches."

"We live in momentous times, Etienne. I'll leave you with these two women to fill in all the details. I must get back to my map."

"Please, Mrs Edwards, please let me help you"

"I'd love that, my boy. But first get up to date with all the miracles and wonders."

"I'll be up in a moment, Mrs Edwards."

"Don't rush. I'll be working most of the day."

"Should I get us something from Steers?"

"That would be nice. And Daphne. I'm pleased, really I am."

"Thank you Mom. I must still work out how I feel."

"When do I graduate from mother to grandmother?"

"I'd say August."

"Time enough to learn the rules."

"Gran says that lady will need counselling."

"It seldom hits you at once, Etienne."

"I'd be very scared."

"It's become an industry here. I suppose you could call it one of the new small businesses. Therapy. Counselling and so on."

"Did you have it when your son died, Mrs Edwards?"

"He didn't die. He was slaughtered."

"It still hurts?"

"No, I didn't. And, my boy I think we should change the subject."

"A Mrs Mthyane came to Wits. last term and did a workshop with whoever was interested and I went along for the ride. And I'm pleased I did. She said it didn't matter what you did as long as you talked about it."

"I have one raised eyebrow when it comes to psychiatry. I'm the original skeptic. I have a cynical streak to my nature, Etienne."

"Mrs said just telling someone helped get it out of your system."

"Perhaps, but I'm not one to look for sympathy. That and charity make me freeze."

"Mrs Mthyane was mugged and quite badly hurt. She said she'd cross the road to avoid people in small groups, and if she couldn't cross the road, she would turn round and go back in the direction she'd come from."

"That's hardly confronting your ghosts."

"That's the point. She used to do that. Then someone said she must talk about it. And she did. She said she bored more people than it was kind to. Just kept telling people what had happened wherever she was. And suddenly one day she felt better. It was gone."

"I don't think I'm ready for the confessional."

"Wherever you are Mrs Edwards, you can practice on me."

"Thank you dear boy. Thank you. I'll remember that."

"Mrs Mthyane told us this story about a couple from Johannesburg who were on holiday in London. Someone broke into the place they were staying. The police came round at once with a trauma person. 'Would you like counselling?' 'No thank you, we're South African.'"

"1994 was, I naively thought, the entry into Paradise. And I was not alone. But it was the same on the other side. And here I am all these years later, the same old woman, fraying at the edges. Enough of that. Let's get down to work."

"What's yesterday's score, Mrs Edwards?"

"No murders.

No rapes.

3 house breakings – Holden Avenue. What else could one expect? Cowey Road. Close. Could be related. Overport. Attempted burglaries: 7. Poor Leigh-Ann. I wonder how she's coping?"

"Shouldn't we add car hi-jacking? And mugging? New flags?"

"And perhaps bank hold-ups should be a separate category? I'm ambivalent there. They make far too much out of ordinary people. Usury. Isn't that a sin? Must look it up. It's certainly not a virtue."

"Gran says you are the youngest old woman she knows. She says you behave like a turbulent thirty year old."

"Indeed. Edna's no chicken."

"Daphne said she agrees."

"I knew they had been discussing me. Daphne's impressionable. I don't mind that, provided she's pointed in the right direction and impressed by the right people."

"I think it's a complement, Mrs Edwards."

"Perhaps. I could warm to it. Turbulent?"

"You don't just sit around, Mrs Edwards."
"Don't you think it time you dropped the Mrs Edwards?"
"I'm sort of used to it now, Mrs Edwards."
"I have a perfectly good name. Well it's workable anyway. "
"Most people I know, most of my friends, don't like the names they were given."
"What would you have chosen, Etienne?"
"Not Etienne. Too fancy. Too decorated. Sort of pretentious."
"So?"
"John, I suppose. Or Peter. Anything ordinary."
"Anyway, from now on it's Mary."
"I'll try, Mrs Edwards, I really will. But don't get cross if I slip up. OK?"
"We've got to do something about this mess. We all must. It's killing us, all this crime. But when people are hungry ..."
"Carols? Carols, Mrs Edwards, I can hear carols."
"There you go again, Etienne."
"Mind if I don't call you anything, for a while?"
"As you wish, Etienne, as you wish. Yes, the carols are early this year, with their tidings of great joy."
"Can I go and see?"
"It's finally arrived. This dreadful, happy season is upon us."
"They sing quite well."
"Not well enough. But at least they're trying. And they're not going round stabbing and plundering and killing and stealing. Be a dear, give them this, and tell them to spread their cheer somewhere else."

"They said thank you, Mrs Edwards. Mary."
"Don't believe for a moment that that is the end. There's more to come. Waves of them like the Ten Plagues of Egypt."
"Ten? I thought there were only seven."
"That's as may be. In Durban we have ten."
"I've been thinking about Christmas, Mrs Edwards. Mary."
"It's difficult not to."
"No, seriously. We've got two turkeys ..."
"3 - 1/2 kilos each of Canadian plastic."
"... and two puddings ..."
"I've thought about it too. Daphne and I don't have too many experiences in common. We go through them in the first hour, and then it's round the same Mulberry bush again and again."
"Upstairs and downstairs Christmasses seem silly. And Gran is thinking about asking Nurse Moodley from the old age place and her husband and kids ..."
"Hindus are flexible. I suppose she wouldn't be offended, Etienne, do you?"
"I was thinking. How about having it in the garden?"
"The garden's a slum. Like the house. Even with the new curtains."
"We could clean it up a bit. I think the curtains are great."
"Then we'd have to invite Mildred. One couldn't very well have crackers and all the other stuff outside her door and not ask her."
"Well why not ask her?"
"She's rather sanctimonious, Etienne. The newly converted are. And she always has Father Gumede round for a drink and mince pies after Morning Mass."
"In for a penny ..."
"Father Gumede comes at a price. He's got a mother he lives with and an unmarried sister. She has the most daunting set of names. Let me think. I must get the order right. Purity Busiswe Angeline Gumede. Or does Angeline come before Busiswe? No matter. She's a croupier at the Sugar Mill Casino."

"What about Mrs Malan?"

"Hilda? Hilda's not a bundle of fun. Seuntjie, he's the younger son, might be glad of the release this year. Melanie, Chummie's wife, teaches Hygiene and R.I. at the local primary. She'll offer up a few more hosannas and a clutch of Praise The Lords at their Pentecostal Tabernacle. They live in Yellowwood Park. The house is a fortress. An electric fence. And Trellidors on every opening. I put my trust elsewhere. I live between fear and hope. We'll place Hilda between Purity and Edna. They will jolly her along."

"Good King Wenceslas looked out
On the Feast of Stephen..."

"The Salvation Army. They get twenty. My regulars. Be a dear and give them these mince pies too."

"Where the snow lay round about,
Deep and crisp and even.
Brightly shone the moon that night,
Though the frost was cruel.
When a poor man came in sight,
Gathering winter fuel."

"Etienne, it's the same programme each year. Same carols, same order. Now for Silent Night."

"Silent Night, Holy Night,
All is calm, all is bright,
Round yon Virgin,
Mother and Child
Holy Infant so tender and mild..."

The trumpet was polished, the notes were not. Two aged tenors, three sopranos and a bass, stopped singing for a moment, waved at the figure on the balcony and moved five houses up the road.

"Silent night, Holy night,
All is calm, all is bright,
Round yon Virgin..."

Edna's Betrayal, as my aunt called it, was to become as famous as Isandlwana, Rorkes's Drift, the Battle of Spion Kop, Blood River, The Slagter's Nek Rebellion, Bambatha and the rest. Not everywhere. But in 142 Bellevue Road. And as important, as talked about and as celebrated. It changed history. It was marked on the calendar, 17 August 2002. It began to accumulate its own rituals. Legends. Myths. And symbols.

"At a social!" my aunt repeated. "At a social! At a social. At a social" became a litany, repeated that dreadful morning, again and again. And through the afternoon, intermittently. "The Norwegian Hall. Are there no depths to which she could not sink?" Moments of silence were preludes to outrage. "No, not at the Hilton, at the Royal, even the Country Club for what it is worth today, but the Norwegian Hall. How could she? How could she?"

Edna's Betrayal changed my aunt's life forever. And looking back on it now, I see that it was the beginning of the end. Not that the end has happened. But it was the moment which marked the

passing of one era, and the beginning of another. And, melodramatic though its festivities were to become, I could understand the bitterness my aunt felt. "It wasn't King's House, but it was my home. My home. And, I really did think we would be together till the end, that we two, my dear, dear house and I, we two would cross the River together. That I would leave with dignity. Surrounded by my precious possessions. My memories. My world." I knew the words by heart. "Not this. Not this. This undignified hovel... This alien turf..."

Edna had met a man at a social organised by the OVER SIXTIES CLUB, had fallen in love, and had announced one morning, that she would be leaving 142 Bellevue Road as soon as things could be arranged. "I was swept off my feet," she said girlishly. "Love at first sight..."

**"I'm wild again, beguiled again
A simpering, whimpering child again
Bewitched, bothered and bewildered am I**

**I'll sing to him, bring Spring to him
And worship the trousers that cling to him
Bewitched, bothered and bewildered am I."**

.....

**"I took one look at you
That's all I meant to do
And then my heart stood still**

**My feet could step and walk
My lips could move and talk
And yet my heart stood still**

**Though not a single word was spoken
I could tell you knew
That unfelt clasp of hands
Told me so well you knew**

**I never lived at all
Until the thrill of that moment when
My heart stood still."**

.....

**"Moonlight and love songs
Never out of date
Hearts full of passion
Jealousy and hate
Woman needs man
And man must have his mate
That no one can deny**

**Well, it's still the same old story
A fight for love and glory
A case of do or die
That the world will always welcome lovers
As time goes by."**

Dear Etienne : I'm adjusting to my incarceration. I've yet to deal with the scars of your grandmother's betrayal. But time heals, they say on those bereavement cards with the silver borders at R9.75 at Cardies. I want to believe it in this instance too, but time has never been an effective balm for other wounds in the past, so am keeping one skeptical eyebrow raised. Thank you for your email. Yes, I'm coping. Mon Repos is worse than most, not that I have much experience of such prisons to make fair comparisons. I crave the untidy friendliness of home, sweet home. No, I'll never forgive Edna for what she has done. A Trojan Horse. 'Old things are passed away. Behold all things are become new.' Corinthians II. That is not to say that the new is preferable. In this case the old is what I crave. But enough of self-pity. When I have absorbed the routine of meals on time, booking ones place in the bathtime queue, and the-no-noise-after-ten prohibition, I'll be able to put my mind to your kind suggestions. It's daunting, the very audacity of a collaboration, with someone of your talent. But the distraction will be welcome and I'll reply fully in a day or two. Etienne, I hope your suggestion, your offer, is genuine and that you don't feel that you have to patronise an old lady who has lost everything. No. That is insulting to you. I'm a pretty good judge of character and I think I have you summed up. No. You would never do that. You have too much integrity.

Wallowing in all this self-doubt, I completely forgot to say that the book is a far better present than a set of ice-skates. I've heard the name, but you'll have to introduce me to Andy Warhol. Your fascination with him is what fascinates me because I cannot understand it. I want to of course, and perhaps in time when I have got to know something about him some of your passion for him will rub off on me. I'm willing to try. You see, Etienne, we are of different generations. Mine sees value in things that are important, and here you are worshiping someone who venerates the trivial and raises a cynical eyebrow to what is great and worthwhile and valuable. Tell me more. Convince me.

"If that's you Edna, I don't want to see you."

"No. It's me madam."

"And what disgusting thing have you brought me?"

"It's..."

"No. Let me guess. Last week's haddock and Thursday's cabbage..."

"And the squash from last night."

"Thank you Mavis. It's not your fault. Even if the food were worth eating, it is inedible by the time it arrives as it's as cold as a corpse. I'm thinking of living on water and tea for a while. No solids."

"Anything else, madam?"

"Yes. For God's sake stop calling me MADAM. I don't own you."

"I know, madam, but..."

"But nothing. I've a perfectly good name. Mary. You might as well use it."

"I'll try, Madam..."

"Actually it's an average kind of name. I had no hand in it. I was non compos mentis when it descended on me. A label nothing more, nothing less. . And I'm sure you didn't choose Mavis either.

"Yes, madam."

"You mean NO."

"No, madam, I mean yes."

"Yes what?"

"My real name's Goodness. I call myself Mavis."

"As Mae West said, goodness has nothing to do with it. It could have been worse.

"Like my sister Thankfulness. And the young one Gladness and the old one Joyfulness."

"Goodness Mavis! Six of one, half a dozen of the other. Nothing we can do about that now... water under the bridge."

"Is there anything else I can do? I must go. Matron's not good today. Very cross."

"When you see that woman, you can tell her from me that she may think I'm over the hill but I'm well aware of what she's up to ... No, on second thoughts, better say nothing about the money. She'll only take it out on you."

"Whatever you say, madam."

"Actually there is something you can do. Be a dear and help me over to the window. I'd like to talk to the sea for a while. Can you believe the fool who designed this place? Mon Repos. Now there's a lie. It's not mine and there's no repose, and the window's practically on the ceiling."

"So you won't fall out."

"Or be pushed out. Not that that is a bad idea."

"Mrs. Rogers managed..."

"Mrs. Rogers was lucky. Fat chance of me falling out cooped up here. Short of wings. Thank you Mavis. That's better. If I crane my neck I can get a fragment of the sea between the dreary roofs. But I can't see the Paw-Paw which I could see in my other roof before I was transplanted."

"There's no Paw-Paw, madam. Mrs de Jager got Wiseman to cut it down."

"Murderess! I wondered where the birds had gone. There were two. A tiny one with a yellow front that used to sit on this edge of the window and gargle at me. And a sad brown creature with limp feathers that did nothing but clear it's throat. But they were company. And life."

"Is that all Madam?"

"Just one more thing. Can you drag that table over here in case I get the urge to carry on with my obituary. And just check that there's enough paper next in the printer. If not you know where it is in the cupboard."

"I'll come back later for the tray."

"Thank you, Mavis, you're a dear. Give the door a good slam or it will fly open with this wind."

Dear Etienne : Were it not for Mavis Ngcobo I would be convinced that the world had lost its mind. She is a sweet oasis of sanity. Charenton would go green with envy if it could see our inmates. The first week has passed with one death from semi-natural causes, and Mrs. Rogers who flung herself out of an upper window. Flung, perhaps is misleading for she was incapable of much movement and must have rolled to her death on Tuesday. I'm craving to get going on our musical. Is that presumptuous, OUR? I hope you take it in the spirit it is intended. This is not a partnership, but a master and apprentice situation. And I am thrilled to be part of it. There are a few things that need my attention before my mind is clear enough to think.

I need to get rid of a few things from the past. Writing will assuage my anger. It will be my confessional. As the conversation I'll have with myself is for my eyes alone I can be frank.

I'm fascinated by what you tell me of Andy Warhol. Fascinated and intrigued, but not at all convinced. You say the book is one brick high and three bricks wide and that it's too heavy to read in the normal way and so you have it on a table and that you open it at a different place every day and read a few pages. That in itself is a strange way to behave, but I refuse to give up. Please tell me more. Imagine treating dear Jane Austen that way. Imagine the confusion in ones mind with all those random fragments meeting each other and shaking hands but not knowing that they were doing together. All very puzzling.

But to get back to the musical. I've had a diet of PORGY AND BESS, IRMA LA DOUCE, ANNIE GET YOUR GUN and of course, the best of all, CABARET. But, Etienne, forgive me for what will seem a silly question. Please explain in simple terms, the difference between musicals and operas. And where on earth does the MAHABARATA fit in? And all those great epic things from Africa? Don't get too technical. A sketch is all I need. I suppose you could call it a ROUGH GUIDE.

To hell with those who think I'm a demented crone. I have more guts and spirit in my little finger than all of them put together. How I hate their mean minds and the mean ways. How I despise their poverty of ambition and their hypocrisy.

I will go out like the Fifth of November. But I'm far from ready. I have too much curiosity.

But to return to the beginning. My academic education is absolutely nothing to write home about, but I've a good brain though I say so myself.

The convent nuns tried their best. As for special achievements, there are none. Events? Yes. One failed marriage, three children, forty-four years of work, and now one room with a shared bathroom and my meals on a tray brought up from the bowels of this disgusting place by a charming woman who is paid a pittance because she is black."

'You are the only one on this floor who ever says thank you, madam. And all the others complain about the food and the towels and the noise and the bathrooms. It's not my fault, madam, if they only give me Handy-Andy three times a week.'

I append this footnote in case I am whisked from this mortal coil before my task is complete. Here is a list of people I hate, followed in each case by my reasons. I would wish them to know both of my dislike of them and why. Perhaps this will give them a chance to mend their ways before the Angel of Death swoops down and hurls them into permanent damnation.

1. Mrs de Jager, the diabolical matron of this old age home. I know you steal from the store. I will not divulge my source for fear they will be victimised. You also make your staff work through their lunch hours which is against the law.
2. Evelyn Haden. You may, for all I know already be dead, in which case the powers that be will have meted out a just punishment. But in case you are still alive, I would like you to know that I was aware of your cheating. I trusted you with my money. For five years you dipped your fingers into my savings. I pity you, not for the crime itself, but for the misuse of our friendship.
3. The Reverend Martin Lombard : I listened to your sermons week in, week out on the radio. They were not works of art, but you talked of love and generosity and it was what we wanted to hear. I have since discovered that you allowed your own father to be incarcerated in a home where he died a lonely and bitter man. On his last day you were too busy tending your flock to visit him.
4. Gladys de Wet. For your airs and graces.

"Dear Gladys, Fate has decided in its lack of wisdom to throw us together in our dusk. Neighbouring rooms in this prison, Siamese twins, joined at the wall. I hear the television at night, muffled by the brickwork and plaster and I wonder if you remember that it is mine? Or has your mind conveniently gone on holiday as it so often does? You are too haughty to admit that you can no longer afford the pitiful symbols you thought we all admired. Once-dear Gladys, revenge will walk through your door.

Now where was I? Ah, yes! Lorna. Undear Lorna.

5. Lorna Bowen. A 'friend' for twenty years. Your fault, dear Lorna, is that in the days of plenty you were always at my side. When the famine struck you deserted me. In war you would have been shot as a traitor.
6. My daughter, Daphne, for the same reason.
7. My husband, should you still be with us. I would not have hated you if we had disagreed, but you were without opinions and not once stood up to me.
8. Peter Alexander, for leaving me in my hour of need and returning to your pink and pretty little wife.
9. And then there is Edna. I write the word traitor, too, next your name and say nothing more for the word speaks volumes.

For those who feel they have escaped, this is not a complete list. But it is a start. I will add to it as I dredge up the past. There are many of you who have been pushed into the deepest recesses of my mind and may never return. But I'll certainly try.

I will not claim virtues I do not have. I think I am honest. I will not pretend to like people I don't. The ones I love, and there are a few, I love without reserve. Love thy neighbour! Fine. But who is my neighbour? Mrs de Jager? Gladys next-door? Mavis who cleans the room? My daughter Daphne? Nice in theory but difficult to fulfil."

Dear Etienne : The slate is clean, my head is clear, I feel light of spirit and ready to begin. Have you a title yet for the musical? Have you begun on the music? What other writing do you already have? Does Edna feature in it at all? (I ask merely out of curiosity.) I've done a lot of thinking these past few days, and must confess to a certain terror. I am not a writer. My English teacher once wrote in my school report – was it standard 7 or was it 8? – that, "although she writes with a certain flair, her respect for the facts is outweighed by a penchant for imaginative excursions." That was because of the Literature paper where I invented a number of situations in Jane Eyre, having forgotten crucial details of the original.

I pass that on simply as a warning. A story has a beginning, a middle and an end. I can't do that. The cat sat on the mat. The cat ate the rat. The cat went to sleep. No surprises there. Life is not neat like a story. Things happen. It's random, unpredictable, messy, ragged, it's made up of lots of fragments, it has raw edges, there is more unfinished business than neat conclusions, life is illogical, haphazard and ' very wonderful. No, Etienne, I couldn't write once-upon-time, happy-ever-after stories. I would feel an enemy to my instincts. I have no aspirations to be Durban's Barbara Cartland. No, that would not be real. If I do anything it would have to be like Beckett, though I'm not for a moment even suggesting I could come within a million miles, but I mean, he would be my guide. Beckettesque perhaps. Ionesco. The Surrealists, though I lack their scintillating visionary creative imaginations. But I could try to make a few fragments for you. Fragments which would have a much logic as my own life which has been unplanned and disorderly and haphazard.

Mind you, I'm not promising anything. The last time I did something resembling this was in standard ten and many moons have risen and sunk since then.

God must have a big perspective and he must be laughing at us stumbling around like headless chickens. So, Etienne, don't raise your hopes too high. All I can do is try. I'll send you the fragments with all my love, hoping that you will work some magic with your music. Give them some colour. Or underline them with frenzied discords like my dear, dear Walton. Etienne, I will launch myself into this new world with the fearlessness which is usually associated with the young, but which this old crone will borrow for a moment or two.

I'm beginning to get a taste of what you seem to see in Warhol, even if it is as foreign as a walk on the moon. You really are convinced of the value of randomness? And chance? You see, Etienne, I'm rather inclined to the opposite. I think order is what it is all about. Making sense of the chaos of the world. But I'm quite prepared to learn. Or at least to see another point of view. I've always thought that really bright people are able to carry two opposed views in their minds at the same time, whereas the completely stupid are blinkered and have only one truth that they stick to through thick and thin.

"How's Mary getting on?"

"She hates the place, of course. Edna."

"Or so she says. I've tried to see her several times, but I'm in the dustbin. Written out of her life. Blotted out of history. I don't exist."

"She's quite like Stalin in her own way."

"I've left messages with the matron. I've sent her emails. I've even pinned a note to her door. She's unforgiving."

"She's made a number of good enemies already."

"That doesn't surprise me. So I'm not alone. Cold comfort in that."

"She's fallen out with the matron, a Mrs de Jager."

"There we'd see eye to eye."

"And with a dear soul in the next room called Gladys de Wet whose only fault seems to be that she thinks she's someone else."

"Only occasionally. And usually the Countess of Athlone. Though sometimes it's Queen Marie of Rumania."

"She has ambitions then, Edna?"

"Sweet soul. Refined and a gentle as a dove. But she's befriended the staff?"

"As usual. She gathers every lame-dog and victim under her wings like a broody hen. She's very fond of a woman called Mavis, one of the cleaners. Or something."

"I know Mavis. Mavis Ngcobo. A tiny woman in a too-big uniform. Sad eyes but a bright smile. "

"Mary makes her laugh. And, Edna, she's forever giving her things."

"Things?"

"Money. Biscuits. The odd pullover. Her usual welfare bit. But now she's begun offloading her possessions."

"I didn't know she had anything left."

"Oh yes. There's still a bit. Not much when you think what there was. She has a box or two in her cupboard. Silver. Some ivory. Last week there was a commotion. Mrs de Jager found a case of silver teaspoons in a plastic shopping bag that Mavis had and called in the police."

"They arrested her?"

"They didn't believe her, but they went upstairs to see Mary who said yes, they had been a wedding present to her mother. And what use were they to her in a place like this and she was sure Mavis would like to have them. Mrs de Jager, as you can imagine, wasn't happy. But there was nothing she could do."

"And since then?"

"Some engraved serviette rings, a silver teapot. A sugar basin. A set of bone handled knives. Seven crystal whiskey glasses. Other bits and pieces. She's loving it. It's a mixture of good works and revenge. She doesn't want Daphne to get anything when she dies. You and Daphne, she feels were in collusion."

"We were. Nobody could ever hope to pull any wool over those sharp eyes. I miss her. I really do. There's a great hole inside."

"Perhaps one day you might be rehabilitated."

"I don't know what penance I would have to do..."

Dear Etienne : If my questions seem naïve, it is because they are those of a stranger in a foreign land looking for signposts and asking directions of the natives. So, Etienne, please turn me to face the right way and I'll get there. I am thrilled to be on this fascinating journey with you, I really am, and I don't want to be a burden. Not one of those companions you take on holiday and then wish you'd left at home because they walk too slowly. Or fail to notice the beauty of this Madonna or that altarpiece of that other building. In music I'm an amateur unlike you. But one with fire and passion. Oratorio I understand a little thanks to my dear, dear William Walton and my dear George Frederic. But they are worlds away from musicals and opera. Although I say that in the best of faith, a giant question mark hovers. ARE they? Perhaps it is all the same family? Perhaps? There are moments in Puccini which sound to me very like bits of Novello. (Is that a dreadful thing to say?) And there are echoes of Rachmaninoff in so much film music. Is it that Puccini and others were plundered by whoever it is that wrote the musicals and film scores, or is there another explanation? Is music just music, one idea with many faces? One big family with geniuses and plodders, the talented and the ordinary, pioneers and followers, the inspired and the mundane, classical, popular, folk and everything in between?

Etienne I'm sure you are busy. But you've not answered my questions about opera and musicals. It's probably Mr Warhol who's leading you astray. His Diaries, you say. I'm curious to know how "807 pages of trivia" can captivate one with such a fertile mind such as you.

My dearest Etienne : What can I say? I am lost for words. If I say you shouldn't have done it, it will sound ungrateful. All I can say is that you have set me on a journey that will lead who knows where. A journey I would never have seen myself taking a week ago, and upon which I embark with excitement. And not a little trepidation. Mavis has found an occasional table in the storeroom, a relic of some demented creature who is no longer with us. And she's installed it right next to the window. A bit of judicious rearrangement and it looks as if it had always been there. She said it was the best light. I'm treading in your footsteps as you suggested, and this morning opened it at random and read a paragraph.

"Friday, March 25, 1983. Decided to see THE OUTSIDERS which was just opening, and loved it. It was like watching LONESOME COWBOYS. You can't believe it – young boys with dyed hair reading poetry in the sunset. And the boy says 'All I really want you to do is read GONE WITH THE WIND out loud to me.' "

Warhol, I can see, will be infectious. If tomorrow's plunge is as exhilarating, I can see you might have a convert. Dear, dear Etienne, thank you for the introduction.

"I think you are actually enjoying this place, Aunt Mary."

It was my fifth visit in two weeks. I was anxious to see how she was settling in to her new room. Later I'd go less often, maybe once a week. But for now it was important that she didn't feel abandoned. It was Edna who was persona non grata. I had not been consigned to her waste paper basket. She said she was pleased to see me, and I think she was, though she was distracted and not unhappy when it was time to go.

"We had two deaths last week and a delicious incident involving Mrs de Jager and Wiseman. The day before yesterday she went off looking for him. He'd been told to cut the bougainvillea in the front garden. She's as tyrannical as Nero and all the Caesars. "Yes, ma'am, no ma'am, three bags full ma'am." He was not in the kitchen, not weeding the lawn, in the garage fixing the broken pane after the hailstorm. Eventually she found him. In his room. 2.15 in the afternoon. Naked, in bed with a woman. In-flagrante-deli-whatever-it-is. Caught in the act. The two of them going at it hammer and tongs. "Wiseman, what on earth are you doing?" What a daft question. It was perfectly obvious what they were doing. "It's all right, Mrs de Jager, it's only my sister."

Mrs. de Jager's glowing with righteousness. God, how I detest the holier-than-thous of the world. I know for a fact that she comes from a small-town community where incest is as rife as Rinderpest. She who casts the first stone and all that. Leave it to me, it will be all over this place. This little hotbed of intrigue is fertile ground. They would love nothing better than a dash or two of scandal about her.

Sister indeed. Wiseman's no fool. Mavis says it was Busizwe and not his sister. She's at Pick 'n Pay and it was her lunch hour. The only time they get. She lives way beyond Eshowe and has miles to travel each day. I love Wiseman for that. He's forever getting the better of Mrs de Jager.

Apart from that and the deaths, nothing much has happened. Madam de Wet next door is in the queue. Doesn't know if it is Tuesday or Durban Station. Mavis has to call her Princess Alice. She thinks she's the Countess of Athlone. It's better than 'Gran' which is what they call us here.

Courtesy has flown out of the window. At night when the snoring and wheezing starts I clamp my headphones on and I'm lifted to heaven. My ears would die without their Bach and Handel."

"And Walton?"

"Walton? Certainly not. Pretentious nonsense. Nobody could like Walton."

"You did."

"I did?"

"He was your hero once."

"Never. Did I tell you that Mrs. Rogoff had a stroke? Yesterday. Mavis says her face is squashed and her voice comes from somewhere strange."

"I don't know her. I'm sorry anyway."

"Don't be sorry. It's a small loss. Her mind had already started to somersault. They should give us a pill when we get to seventy. Round us all up and send us on our way."

"If there is nothing you need, Aunt Mary, I'll be going."

"I'd love a packet of Rose Pouchong. I've decided to stick to tea and water for a week. Andy Warhol went through a Pouchong phase. What's good for the goose..."

"Andy Warhol? He's the one who did the Campbell's Soup cans? Jackie Kennedy..."

"One of the greats..."

"See you soon."

"You too, dear boy."

Dearest Etienne : So I'm not so far off track as I supposed. I was greatly encouraged by what you said. No, of course I don't think Novello is the poor man's Puccini. He's not the poor man's anything. He's mediocrity's security blanket. Never has a duller man walked on God's earth. But somewhere in his dull mind, memories of Tosca or Boheme lurk. And, yes, now that you mention it, I can hear India in Gypsy melodies and in Hungary and even in Spain. So we are a scattered family, parading in fancy clothes, often disguised. You have inherited your grandfather's archeological genes. You have opened my ears to question everything now. Trust nothing on the surface. Did and dig and dig.

Have I got it right? Or at least semi-right. A musical has dancing and music and singing and talking? An opera doesn't have dancing? Though sometimes they say something. But not often. And then not much. And when they do, you wish they hadn't, and wish they'd sung it instead. Is that simplistic?

You said in one of your emails that you wanted to reinvent the language of musicals. And that made me think of language as such. Are we going to use English? Just English? There I go again. Listen to me, WE! It's YOUR musical, Etienne dear. I must really be careful. Please, Etienne, if at times I seem to be poaching on your territory, please tell me. Anyway, that said, I think it would add spice if we remembered we have eleven languages. Plus, God knows how many myriads of others. Maybe He's confused too. Mind you, if He's coped with India and their eighteen, plus the sixteen hundred tinier ones, South Africa is a piece of cake. As I am writing this, a thought has just popped into my head. How about a duet of sorts, something on the lines of ANYTHING YOU CAN DO I CAN DO BETTER, but using the names of the languages, a South African singer on one side of the stage and an Indian on the other.

WE'VE GOT SETSWANA, SESOTHO AND ISISWATI to which the reply would be AND WE HAVE GUJARATI, TELEGU AND MANIPURI, then YIYSONGA, ISIXHOSA AND ENGLISH, and their reply of SANSKRIT, SINDHI AND ASSAMESE. And then the Indian could butt in quickly with another verse, PUNJABI, NEPALI AND MALAYALAM, which would only be fair with so many more to get through than we have. A little Tower of Babel in the background would be nice. And maybe a chorus of people chanting the names of the lesser known languages? Or dying ones. I've made a list. We come out on top. Khomani, right here in this country is spoken by only twenty-three people. Imagine! The Australians have ninety-seven

people who speak Bunuba. And in Guatamala there is Itza. One hundred and forty seven. Etienne, let's do something for Khomani. What does San music sound like? Could you quote a fragment? It must be our oldest music, reaching back to the beginning of Africa itself. What instruments do they play? A single string on a branch bent to a bow? And their voices? I am so ignorant. By the time you reply, yet another language and its music somewhere in the world will be teetering on the edge. So, so sad. It would our gesture, Etienne, nothing more. But one must not underestimate the power of symbols. Just a thought.

But to get back to digging, that is what I've been doing with the help of Mavis who, in another incarnation would have been the perfect private secretary. She's making order of the chaos of my life. Forgive me for clinging to order when dear Andy preaches a different gospel. Older leopards find it none too easy to change their spots. Anyway, it was yesterday that she finally found this piece I cut from who knows what paper. I think you will find some of the ideas intriguing. It echoes your own for a new approach to the musical. To reinventing the genre. So here it is for what it is worth.

I actually saw the Faust he is talking about. Pretty to look at, glorious singing mostly, but I'm not sure I'd want to have Gounod around for a meal, he's dreadfully long-winded. But, certainly he has his moments. A good pair of scissors is what he needs. Listen to me, music critic! Delusions of something or other!

You can take a traditionalist approach and set Faust in some historical German never-never land, if not with dirndl skirts and lederhosen, then something close to it.

History is a barrier, especially for an audience unfamiliar with opera, the very people Opera Africa wants to reach. With so much decoding before you could work out who was doing what to whom and why, you would shrug your shoulders and let them get on with it.

There is the fashionable approach. You can give it new clothes, setting it, say, in a slaughterhouse, in a nuclear submarine or the dressing room of the local soccer club, turning Marguerite into Indira Gandhi, Faust into Winnie the Pooh and Mephistopheles into a Chippendale stripper, re-scoring the music for tabla and synthesiser adding gumboot dancers from Robinson Deep and a laser show. Pretension would win, the audience lose and Gounod would be angry.

But it seems perfectly sensible - because of who we are and where we live to want to see Faust through our own eyes. Doesn't Shakespeare find a home in Beijing or Buenos Aires? Sometimes, even, a new one in Stratford. Why should Faust, then, not breathe African air?

But one has to tiptoe through the minefield of our ad-agency ethnicity, in which a handful of chevrons in bright colour is a metaphor for our struggling rainbow, where animal print equals Africa and Ndebele-anything fills in the gaps.

The real Africa has the contradictions implicit in real life. Our new style is being born on every street, defying categories, exuberant, unique and surprising. It is tie-dyed and homespun, chic and shabby, with women and men from the pages of Cosmopolitan and Elle, in blankets and beads, Nehru suits and cotton pyjamas, Lagos print and Tokyo lycra, it is Saville Row and Grey Street, tunics, turbans, buttons and bows.

I want what is happening on the stage to equal the audience looking at it, so that people will see themselves and their friends and hear their thoughts, fears and dreams sung in voices they know.

The great London exhibition of 1996 answered the question of what is Africa by putting between the covers of a single, large book, objects from the beginning of time till today, from Egypt to the Cape, so this production takes its reference from anything which was made on the continent, anywhere

and at any time. Eclectic we are, certainly, and rich, yes, richer in our heady mix than any other continent. But why Faust? It is not an easy opera. Technically it is a challenge, the singers can learn so much. North of Durban in the KZN heartland choirs have been working for months, growing in skill and confidence, extending their voices and knowledge in a way a lesser work would not have allowed. And the audience, too, will be challenged. Faust is, on one level, the boy-chases-girl, boy-wins-girl, boy-loses-girl story with a happy conclusion we all know, with intrigue and gossip, murder, double-dealing, sex before marriage, drama, betrayal, love, sadness, despair, war and peace. In short, the stuff of our lives.

But on another level it deals with the questions of principle and expediency we all have to face each day, the moral dilemmas of ordinary people and those in position of power. It is an appropriate message.

Etienne, will ours be a boy-meets-girl story? I really like the idea of all those other ingredients. They are all part of the world I loved so much in my other life in Bellevue Road, all those murders, rapes, housebreaking and mayhem gone forever and ever. How I miss them, and Hector. And at moments, your grandmother too, her, whose name I still will not let past my lips. But the moments pass and she does too.

'In perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren.' That's Corinthians 2. Paul has an ear for rhythm. And he gets under the skin of one's fears when one feels set upon by all and sundry. He might have written a tune or two if he'd not been so busy with all those epistles.

And I must confess that Warhol is getting under my skin too. I wonder how the two of them would get on? Andy and Paul?

Dear Etienne : I'm actually looking forward to crossing the barrier in May. Sixty-five! I never thought I'd see fifty. I'd hate to be young again. Being ancient is freedom to be yourself. I'm sure butterflies feel the same when they step out of the browns and unravel their colours. It's a time for taking stock. There's more of me that's gone, and less that's left. And where I've been doesn't interest me much. Tomorrow intrigues me, and today. History is like jelly. It's never still. Life is all about the wood and the trees. Stand too close and you see nothing, stand too far back and you are not sure what you are supposed to be looking at. History's for the living, not the dead. Not nostalgia for the past. And it's useful only if it's an inspiration for the living. My own history is only useful if it helps me find where I'm going. The past can be a burden. Like children. One must learn tolerance. To let it go. Like one's offspring, really.

"Cast me not off in the time of old age: forsake me not when my strength faileth." I enjoy this time when parents are children: when old women are many and men are few, and when the latter look less frightened than the former.

We are fewer than the young. And we are no threat. But we've earned the right to be irresponsible. I'm not afraid of getting older. But I'm afraid of peoples' reaction to me getting older. I'm not afraid of being different. Average is such an ugly word. To live in a world of neatness, order and safety where everyone and everything is the same. I suspect Daphne's Tuscan's something like that:

Children, one of each / two the same
A dog / two dogs
Cats

Two domestics and an ironing woman
Braais on Sunday
Fish on Friday
Yardley
Abba
Chicken a la King
Drip dry
Barbra Streisand
And toilets that smell of the forest and butterfly meadows.

Not for me. I veer to the other side. Rebels, square pegs, eccentrics, freaks, perverts: slender things to pin the future on perhaps. A tiny hope, but it's all there is. Non-conformists. That's our hope.

Sentiments I know our dear Andy W would agree with.

My dearest Etienne : Durban was never quite Broadway but it liked to believe it was. That was way, way back in the bad old days, and for every imported musical, we had a couple of homegrown ones – not Ipi Tombi this and Ipi Tombi that, but the real thing, authentic and therefore a thorn in the side of the authorities who were suspicious of any sign of insurrection in the arts. Creative people obey their own rules and that spelled danger. The very idea of thinking for yourself was anathema to the system. Mkhumbane, King Kong, Miriam Makeba, The Manhattan Brothers, Dolly Rathebe, Todd Matshikiza and a hundred others – I saw most of them. Some became famous. And those who didn't were happy simply to go on forever making wonderful music and dance. Alan Paton, I seem to remember did the lyrics for Mkhumbane and that was enough to have the eyes of the Special Branch wide open and looking. Would they ban it, would they let it open and then close it, would they stop it half way through opening night?

Backstage, nobody was immune to the jitters. Archbishop Hurley, never afraid to make a symbolic appearance to help a righteous cause, appeared unannounced at the final dress rehearsal. He'd sensed the anxieties. Doris did her bottom-wiggling dance, DORIS AKATHANDI especially for him, right in his face, and he laughed like a drain. It was the picture of the two of them on the front page of the Mercury next morning that did the trick. The police decided to back down. With all the publicity it would have become a major incident. What Doris Ngwenya was to Zulu music, the Burke Brickhills were to the feathers and sequins kind. Marcelle, the star of Annie Get Your Gun, herself very grand, very divaish - though she shared a bed sitter in Umbilo with someone else from the cast - was amazed to find the star of all stars, the great and glamorous Joan Brickhill, backstage, helping make the scenery, sawing a plank, hair like a blonde meringue and fingernails as red as Valentine roses, stilettoed and enveloped in satin, sawing. Joan paused in mid stroke, rose up and said in her exquisitely modulated voice, 'Christ was also a carpenter', paused theatrically, and then continued her labour.

It seems like another age, which it really was. The stars today are no less glamorous, no less professional, but, somehow, more everyday and that is how it should be in our new democracy.

I'm lucky to have known both worlds. No matter how messy our new age is, it has given us the right to be ourselves and think our own thoughts. Best of all we can be as odd as we like and as different as we want to be.

Perhaps, just perhaps, somewhere in your musical, we could mention a few of the pioneers who gave us this freedom? How I don't know. Is that sentimental? I hope not.

And before I forget, I read this week that there is a new production of CARMEN in the making. Done entirely in Xhosa and set in the Transkei. Imagine! But why not? They did the Merry Wives of Windsor in Arabic in Cairo with an all Egyptian cast way back in the sixties. So a Xhosa Carmen isn't exactly breaking new ground. They talked about how musical it is as a language, full of open vowels and percussive consonants. I'm pleased you agree that we should not limit ourselves to an English text. 'God gave us great voices,' Mavis said the other day, 'because HE knew we wouldn't be able to afford pianos.' She would be only too happy to translate for us. Someone once said that Zulu is the perfect language for opera, as perfect as Italian, and for the same reasons. What the reasons were, I forget now. But lucky for us the Italians invented it and not the Chinese. Going to the opera there, they tell me, is more a patriotic duty and than a fun evening out. But then most things are that in China anyway. They don't actually sing, well not what we would call singing, they sort of speak the words in high pitched voices while the orchestra does something equally unmusical and more or less unrelated on the most extraordinary instruments.

And while on the subject, Etienne, how do you feel about the way they are using opera to sell everything from the World Cup soccer to icecream and new Italian cars? Vodacom has a selection of ring-tones – the Barber of Seville, the Anvil Chorus, the Soldiers' Chorus, Madonna e mobile, and One Fine Day. I've not made up my mind where I stand.

Oh, one last point, do you think the next Callas will come out of South Africa? I really hope so. It would seem to me that our singers are actors too. They don't just stand around like toy carved figures in those clocks where people pop out of doors on the hour. They don't just stand there and open their mouths and then shuffle to the next place on the stage. They ACT the part. And that's not something you can teach people. It's inborn. When Mavis sings a bit of a chorus to me she moves with the sound. Her whole body comes alive. She's no Callas. But I've no doubt that there is one lurking right now in Kwa Mashu or Umlazi or Chesterville, buried in some choir, just waiting to be discovered. We must be clever enough to do just that.

"She's not here. She's gone out. She won't be back till late."

"It's me, madam."

"Then why the hell didn't you say so, woman? Come in."

"Madam. It's gone."

"Gone? What's gone? Pull yourself together, woman. And come over here where I can see you. You know I can't turn my neck. What's happened?"

"Matron's taken it, madam."

"Taken what?"

"The bottle."

"Bottle?"

"You know, madam, the bottle."

"You're talking in riddles. What bottle?"

"The one you gave me."

"I gave you?"

"This morning, madam, this morning."

"Decanter, woman, decanter."

"Yes, madam, the glass."

"Crystal ...but no matter. Sit down and tell me what happened."

"It was in my bag and after lunch it wasn't there."

"You say it was Mrs de Jager. How do you know?"

"Because she is the only one who looks into our bags."

"You mean to tell me she actually goes through your bags?"
 "Every day. Before we leave. And sometimes our pockets as well. She thinks we steal."
 "Perhaps it was one of the other cleaners?"
 "No, madam, it wasn't."
 "How can you be sure? You can't simply accuse someone..."
 "I showed it to all of them when I went downstairs..."
 "And?"
 "And ... they ..."
 "And they what?"
 "They did not like it. They said ... it was rubbish."
 "Swines, the lot of them. Swines! Uncultured swines! But somewhere amongst them is a person of taste. And I doubt it is Mrs de Jager. She wouldn't know cut-glass from plastic."
 "But..."
 "So, Mrs de Jager's taste runs to antique crystal? Mavis, you surprise me ..."
 "But ... but ..."
 "The dungeon where you all work is a den of iniquity. Not too many angels down there you all seem tarred with the same brush. Prudence, Beauty, Wiseman, John, Madam de Jager, the lot."
 "But madam, I liked it ..."
 "Then you should have taken more care of it."
 "But madam ..."
 "I'm sick of the lot of you. Like Pilate I wash my hands. And for God's sake how many times do I have to tell you that I'm not your madam. It's not surprising that you are all so downtrodden. You let everyone walk over you. All the Mrs de Jagers of the world. You throw yourselves at their feet and ask them to trample over you. It's beyond hope. No wonder everything here is such a mess."
 "But you ..."
 "Mavis my dear, I suggest that you confront that harridan yourself. I can't fight your battles for you."
 "I can't, madam. I can't. she'll tell me to go..."
 "She wouldn't dare."
 "I can't madam. She doesn't like me. She says I'm cheeky. She says I think I'm white. She says you make trouble."
 "Indeed! You go down and tell Eva Braun you've been talking to me. Tell her I know everything. Tell her I'd like to talk to her. Tell her I know about the money. And tell her that you saw me reading a copy of the Labour Relations Act. Better still, tell her that I can't put it down. It's my favourite book at the moment.
 You're not listening to me, woman. Skip it. It wasn't much of a joke, anyway. But don't forget to say I know all about the money."
 "If you want me to, madam. I'm going."
 "Now we'll see some fur flying. Mrs de Jager, your executioner awaits! Mavis, be a dear. In the drawer over there, the second one down I think, is a folder. Dig around. See if you can find the photostats of the Employment Act for me, please. Stapled in the top corner."

"Section 14. 2.6.1. Yes, here it is. "... an employee must have a meal interval of 60 minutes after five hours work." Mrs. de Jager, I wonder if you are aware of this? And here: "an employee who works occasionally on Sunday must receive double pay." I must check with Mavis.
 "No unlawful deductions may be made unless agreed in writing."

"Section 3.2.1 Employees are entitled to 21 consecutive days annual leave, or by agreement one day for every seventeen days worked or one hour for every seventeen hours worked."

If none of those get you, Mrs de Jager, I'm sure this in Section 30.4.3 will. "A statement of employee's rights must be displayed in the workplace in official languages used in the work place."

Dear Etienne : I am a bundle of apprehension. Here is my first contribution. My first attempt at writing. My first fragment. I'm apprehensive because I feel that

- a. It might be beyond redemption.
- b. You might find it an unhappy companion to whatever else you already have.
- c. It does not suggest music.

Despite these reservations, I am summoning courage to send it. Should you find it to be of no value whatsoever, please have no hesitation in telling me.

It is something that has been hovering in the recesses of my mind for a while. I suspect that it is slightly Jane Eyreish in that I cannot now remember which parts are facts, which inventions.

First fragment

A woman was sprawled in the road. She was face down, slightly curled. She could have been sleeping. Her shopping was scattered in the road and around her. Some oranges were rolling down the hill. The door of her car had been ripped from its hinges. A woman in a blue Datsun was slumped over the wheel. A man was leaning through the window comforting her. The left headlight was smashed. The mudguard was embedded in the tyre.

I will not rest until I hear one way or the other from you, Etienne. Remember what we agreed, that we would be brutally honest with each other.

Oh, by the way. I really enjoyed what you said about the Chinese. So they still call it the Pekin Opera? Pekin without the "g"? How quaint. Which is as it should be. I'm really not for the current fad of renaming this town and that street simply for the sake of it. Going back to an original name is another matter altogether. Mumbai and Chennai. The English tongue was not made for those Indian gymnastics. Polekwani and the rest are fine too. But some things are sacred. Imagine asking for Beijing Duck in a restaurant. Or Mumbai Duck. And what self respecting Pekinese would allow any tampering with ITS name, PC sensibilities, notwithstanding. But to get back to China, they might have had opera long before someone invented Italy, but it's hardly the same thing is it? More like circus than music. All those acrobats and mime and recitation and dancing. A real mongrel. And no scenery. What is opera without that? Pantomime it seems to me. Comedians and painted faces. Whatever next? Performing dogs? Conjurers? Trapeze artists?

My aunt had been married. That was before my time. She was a beauty. There were lots of boyfriends. I remember some of the names. Bob. Bill. Charles. Lou. Another Bob. What they did, who they were, what they looked like, I don't remember now. They were all sub-standard. She was so ravishing. She could have had anyone. It puzzled me then and it's puzzled me since. Perhaps she wanted to be centre stage? Yes, she did get married. A little mouse of a man and went to live in New Zealand with him. It did not last, though he was dull enough. I don't think she liked housework. Her feelings for him evaporated quite quickly and soon she was back. I was pleased. I'd missed her. Life was always brighter when she was around."

Dear Etienne : My heart did a double back somersault. You are right, I'm sure. It's not your usual musical fare. But you said that you wanted to break the mold. Break the barriers, and perhaps we

can do it together. Spurred on by the laurels you heap on my unworthy shoulders, I have done another piece. I have sub-titled it, LETTER TO A LOST HUSBAND. Where do the ideas come from? One moment my head is empty, the next an idea happens. Life is miraculously unpredictable.

Second Fragment – LETTER TO A LOST HUSBAND. “Did you ever get the letter? You didn’t reply. You’ve never written. Did you understand that I had to leave? I couldn’t divorce you. Divorce is so brutal. I’m the original coward. I couldn’t bear a scene. In a funny way I loved you. It was easier this way. That morning, you went to work. I went to the airport. I was back in South Africa two days later. I wrote at once so that you wouldn’t worry. If I had to tell you that I was leaving because you bored me, it would have hurt you too much. I wanted to avoid that. I think of you sometimes. Not often. But occasionally. And wonder if you are still alive.”

Again, dear Etienne, I wait anxiously to hear your reaction.

My head swims with apprehension. Words are one thing, the music is beyond my imagining. The music you will compose to go with the text, that is supposing you feel the piece is suitable.

I jot down a few thoughts, more to amuse myself than as serious ideas for you, though I’ll pass them on, nonetheless.

- 1 What sort of music does the text suggest?
- 2 Should the words be spoken or chanted rather than sung?
- 3 Should we consider rewriting it in verse?
- 4 Perhaps a Maori influence to the music?
- 5 I have this idea, and please don’t ask me where it sprang from, this idea of two women, one on either side of the stage, speaking the words, speaking alternate sentences. DID YOU EVER GET THE LETTER? the left one says. YOU DIDN’T REPLY the right one says. YOU’VE NEVER WRITTEN. And so on. A tennis match of words. What it means, if it means anything at all, I have not the slightest idea. Warholesque? Perhaps something about the fact that we are all more than one person. That in every body there lurks two sides. Maybe more. Sometimes with different personalities. Sometimes in conflict. The other woman, I suppose, could be my alter ego. In which case we would have to rewrite the words so that alternate sentences were contradictory. Well, at times only. I suppose one CAN agree with your other half? If not we’d all be schizophrenic.

You once said, dear Etienne, that one and one in any creative exercise, should never equal two. Perhaps, just perhaps, I have, without intending to, stumbled upon this magic formula?

Dear Etienne, forgive these ramblings. It is, I must not forget, your musical.

You also said that if something was predictable it could not be art. The same must be true for people. The moment the surprises stop I lose interest in someone. Dear Andy gives me endless joy. He’s in Washington and he’s somehow got a ticket to Reagan’s inauguration. “Listening to the address you get fired up and I felt like being a Republican. But then when it was over and you looked at the faces of all the Republicans, I was glad I’m a Democrat – there really is a difference.” Dear man, however wayward he sometimes is, when it comes to what matters, his heart is in the right place.

Daphne’s father was Peter Alexander. They had been engaged briefly during the war. Something had happened and they had split up. When they got together again, she had a husband in Auckland he a wife in Durban. It wasn’t ideal but they made it work. When she found

herself pregnant there was talk of an abortion but it didn't happen and she brought up the child alone. I thought it a brave thing to decide to do. It was daring then. There was endless trouble between Peter Alexander and his wife. Their marriage was on the rocks long before my aunt came onto the scene. Anyway it all got too much and one day he took out a gun and shot his wife and then turned the gun on himself. Premeditated? We'll never know. There were no notes. My aunt read about in the paper. It's tough on a child being illegitimate. Well it was then. But to have a murderer for a father. I'm not sure whether Daphne was ever told. Whether to this day she knows her own history. I can't ask her. And if I quizzed my aunt she'd sidestep the question. I often wonder if the uncertainty about who she is and where she came from wasn't why the two of them have been at war most of their lives. I could understand Daphne bearing a grudge, but, if one thinks about it another way, if my aunt had not had an affair, Daphne wouldn't have happened. She simply wouldn't have been. It's a funny thought, not existing at all.

"There's no point in knocking. She's not here. Go away. There's nobody here. She's dead. She died in her sleep. And anyway it's too early for visitors. It's only six. Go away. You'll wake the dead."

"Madam."

"You?"

"Yes, me."

"But it's so early. You only start work at seven. What's the matter? Come in. it's not locked."

"It's something for you."

"For me? How wonderful." Mavis! What on earth have you done to yourself? Come over here. Let me look at you. I hardly recognised you. What has happened?"

"Nothing. It's me. The same as yesterday."

"No. You're different. Of course. You're wearing a dress. You look like a person. I've never seen you in a dress. Always that uniform. That outsize overall."

"But madam ..."

"It's so demeaning. You are really quite pretty. I've never really looked at you before. And that's a pretty dress."

"Thank you, Miss Mary. I made it myself."

"You did? Now that is something I admire. I have ten thumbs, no fingers. My goodness you are clever. It is beautifully sewn."

"I make a lot of things. All the clothes for the children. And curtains for the house. And I have just started making table cloths."

"Table cloths?"

"Not ordinary ones. Painted. With pictures."

"Painted? I've never heard of that."

"Flowers, birds ..."

"With paint?"

"And sometimes just designs. Patterns. Pretty colours. We have a small group who do them. A teacher from Durban comes to the township to show us. She knows a lot. She's clever. And she's young."

"You really are a dark horse. Who would have guessed there was a Van Gogh lurking inside waiting to spring out?"

"I'll bring you one. For our table. It will make the room happy."

"Thank you, my dear. That's very sweet. I'd love that. You say you make clothes for your children. You must tell me about them. I really know nothing about you."

"There are nine."

"Gracious! You certainly have been busy!"

"Some other time, Miss Mary. I can't stay long. Matron would kill me if she knew I was here. We can't go upstairs before she's seen us. Before inspection. And we must be properly dressed. The uniform."

"Some other time. We must talk. I want to hear everything."

"Everything!"

"Yes. Everything."

"Not everything. Too many mistakes."

"Let me decide that. I want to know it all. We need mistakes to make us wise. With mine I should be Solomon. But I'm not. Enough of that. I'm holding you up. I must open my parcel. What is it?"

"I know you hate the food here, Miss Mary. This is from home. I made it."

"That is sweet of you my dear. Very sweet."

"Open it, Miss Mary. Open it."

"It's dead."

"I killed it this morning. Now. Before I caught the train."

"It still has feathers."

"It's fresh. I grew it myself."

"But I can't eat this. It's ..."

"It will make you strong."

"It's raw."

"Miss Mary must cook it."

"Cook it? On what? I don't even have a kettle to make myself a cup of tea..."

"Your nephew will cook it for you."

"Him? "

"The one who was here yesterday. Who always comes to see you."

"Thank you, Mavis. I know who he is."

"He has a house. He will do it."

"He's got enough on his plate without worrying about cooking chickens for ancient aunts."

"He's a nice man, Miss Mary. He wouldn't mind."

"Mavis. It really is very sweet of you and I really do appreciate it but I'd much rather you took it back home and used it for your family. And besides, how on God's earth would I eat a whole chicken? It would last me for weeks. No. it's much better that you take it for your family."

"I can't."

"Can't?"

"No, Miss Mary, it's Tuesday."

"Of course it's Tuesday. What on earth has that to do with anything?"

"We can't afford meat during the week."

"But that is ridiculous. I'm giving this to you. A present. It doesn't count."

"All the same I can't do it, Miss Mary."

"Pull yourself together, woman. Where's your imagination? Pretend it's Saturday."

"No, Miss Mary, I can't."

"It's bleeding, Mavis, it's bleeding."

"Don't worry, Miss Mary, I'll get a cloth."

"It's the packet. It's torn."

"When I dropped it, Miss Mary."

"It's through to the mattress. No wonder my knees felt damp."

"Madam mustn't worry."

"I assure you, madam's not worried in the least. But I can just imagine what will go through dear Mrs de Jager's foul mind when she sees this. 'Your sheets are full of blood.' 'Really, Mrs de Jager? I admit there is a little. A very little. 'A matter of opinion. I am not prepared to argue.' 'And nor am I.' 'Please explain how your sheets became soaked in blood.' I can't. Miracles are beyond the understanding of mortals, Mrs de Jager. And though you might not believe it, you are mortal. And, alas, so am I. For the moment at least, though I feel myself gradually slipping across to the other side. (Though what side that will be we have yet to see.) Let us say that a miracle took place in the night. I have given birth. To what I cannot be sure for the creature was spirited away before I opened my eyes."

"She won't see the sheets, madam. I mean Miss Mary. I'll put them in another basket when I change the beds tomorrow."

"In that case, Mavis, don't let's waste our energies further. We'll clean the mattress and leave the sheets. I've lived with worse in my time. A little blood never hurt anyone. Put the sheets on top of Mrs de Wet's laundry.

"I'm going now, Miss Mary. Matron will be here soon."

"Thank you for the chicken, Mavis. I'm sure there's a packet in the drawer. And there's some Selotape somewhere. Put it in the bottom of your bag. Can't have Mrs de Jager catching sight of Exhibit A."

"I nearly forgot. Your book."

"Put it on the table over there. You enjoyed it?"

"It's like your family. And something like mine. But there were some words I didn't understand."

" 'Lear's' not the easiest of plays. You're right. It is close to the bone. You've made a list of words for me? Good. I'll go through them. You can have them back at lunchtime."

Dear dear Etienne : The writing has given me wings. I've discovered I'm a butterfly not a dreary moth. I can never begin to thank you for what you have done. I've discovered that it is the life within that matters: the material trappings mean nothing. Here I thought I would be miserable in this prison, but it was not to be. I am living a richer life than ever before and I love you for it. In the mists between sleeping and waking, this tiny story appeared in my head as clear as spring water. Where, oh where did it come from, this ancient woman and her even more ancient parrot? Do you believe in reincarnation? These three, certainly have never been part of my present life, a woman, a parrot and a sculpture.

Third Fragment

She sat straight as a pharaoh in her high-backed chair, her hands gripping the carved scroll arms, her knees together. "Algernon, dearest, we have acquired a gem. You will love it. But be patient, dear one, for they can only deliver it the day after tomorrow. Shall I give you the tiniest of clues? It is Siamese. Yes, Algernon, from Siam. There are jungles there and birds like you who would have flown all around it, and rested on it. And if you promise to be a very good little man, I will let you play on it too. It was a bargain, Algernon. A bargain because the people from the Museum were not there. Though why that should surprise me, I do not know. If you plonked a bit of the Parthenon in front of them, they would be none the wiser. The truth is that we live amongst savages. Yet you, I feel sure, have an appreciation of things of the spirit. It is not your fault that you turned out to be a bird. Perhaps, just perhaps, is it possible that God had His off days and that when he mixed his ingredients, he added a dash of human with your genes?"

You said, Etienne, that the musical would be like the new South Africa, a mixture of this and that, "a heady brew," you called it. What kind of music would you compose for a parrot? It would be a pity not to let him sing. Does Siamese music sound anything like Chinese or Japanese? It is going to be a very eclectic concoction. Just like us.

I've been wondering, Etienne, and you can help me. Can music appeal to all of our five senses? Feeling, hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting? Or is this asking too much. It would be astonishing if it could. Perhaps it was beyond people in the past, but, who knows, could you be the one to change all that? Just a thought.

"SOMETIMES EVEN MUSIC CANNOT SUBSTITUTE FOR TEARS," so saith Paul Simon. He's wrong. It depends on the music. I'd agree with him if he were talking about his own music. Though I doubt that he was. But when words fail, when thoughts let one down, when memories betray one, there is only one place to turn. Not Shakespeare. Not poetry. Forget Wordsworth and Keats. Too prosaic. They illustrate the mood, though they occasionally get under the skin. No, music does the trick every time. And only music. Not Paul Simon. The tears he provokes are those of nostalgia. Dear Noel Coward called it the power of cheap music. There's nothing more

demoralising than nostalgia. All that sentimental reliving the past. No, I mean real music. Like those final moments of Traviata. God must have been in Verdi's head, prompting him. "Here you are, these are the notes, and this is how you must put them together." How else to explain something so sublime? And the tragic moments in Puccini. Tosca. And of course one needs colour and fanfare to celebrate ones all too few moments of glory. And there have been some. Not many. But enough to convince me they are possible. A clarion call of trumpets from my dear, dear Handel. He curdles the blood. An ominous rumble of drums and cymbals from Walton that trembles the flesh. And those notes that go right up to heaven in ONE FINE DAY. Yes, I say with my whole being tingling, I've been there too. I too have known ecstasy. It works every time. No matter how often I play those bits and pieces. They never pall. And I suppose that is what art is about. And why there is so little that makes it into the first division. Why we need the Paul Simons and the dreadful Whitney Houstons of the world. Third league players. But the gods! It is simply knowing that someone has felt what you are feeling. And has the good manners not resort to the easiness of words. We are born alone, we live as islands, we die alone. But we need the comfort of knowing that others, even if it just one other person, that someone has got into your head and read your sorrow, your joy, your loves and, yes, your hates, your frustrations, struggles, hopes and despair.

Etienne, forgive me for preaching. Hector. My dear, dear home. Raymond. I look around at this squalor and am sad. To lose a child is the saddest thing for a mother. It goes against the natural order. Daphne is no substitute. Nor the wretched thing she has produced. By the time she has the decency to bring it to show me, I'll be in my grave and he will be at high school. Royston-Jon. Can you credit that? Hyphenated and with no H. God save us from the Tracy-Annes, the Cindy-Lous and the Kimberly-Tylers who might, just might, be lurking in her loins. One day, when you have lived enough, you'll understand what I mean.

Oh, by the way, yes, I do understand your process. Get all the fragments together and if they are each in their own way good enough, then no matter how you shuffle them, they will work together. Like a good party where everyone's special and nobody knows anyone at the beginning and, apparently, nobody has anything in common, but by the end everyone's talking and everyone's happy. You, dear Etienne, are the glue that will stick all the bits together and give them a shape. You and Andy W have taught me so much. I've learned to enjoy the haphazard, the unexpected, the random, the chance. Above all you have given me freedom from worry and from fear of the unknown. Freedom to be myself. You've shown me one can be old at twenty, young at sixty.

She's missed her vocation. Or, rather, she's just found it. She should have been a teacher. Or a missionary. I love her passion. There's never any grey. She's making up for what she calls her wasted years. There I disagree. They have all been wonderful years. Not always happy, but never dull. The affairs. The hopeless marriage. Cars. The children. She's redeeming the past through Mavis and I hope she doesn't crumple under the onslaught. They've done "Lear." Now they're onto "Macbeth". And suddenly I've got to make all these tapes of Handel. She is determined to wean Mavis and her choir off Greensleeves and Ipi Tombi or Old Man River " and all the other township choir clichés.

Dearest Etienne : I like your new thought. Anachronistic it should be. That gives you all the leeway you need to borrow themes and ideas and melodies and styles from the beginning of time. And that makes perfect sense to me. All the world is ours. The days of exclusive this and exclusive that have gone. We live in a more generous age. Remember the time when someone said that black people could not appreciate Beethoven because he was white. Or was it,

SHOULD not? A prohibition. I ask you! I hate boxes. Music is music. Boxes are limiting. Jazz, classical, black, white, women's music, church music, children's music. Once upon a time perhaps, but not today. We all have such choice. Unlimited menus. Everything that has ever been is ours. In every culture, every place, every language. There has never been a time like ours. Do you have to be Egyptian to appreciate the pyramids? Are vegetarians unable to enjoy Rembrandt's Flayed Carcass? Should Jews have a problem with Wagner? I'm all for cross pollination. Purity is out. Incest is in. I'm all for a mongrel world.

Anachronistic and eclectic that is how our musical will be. Which brings me to my next fragment. I have to confess that I stole it. But it is such a poetic piece of writing that I feel no guilt. Perhaps it will spark some ideas for the costumes or the set. Or both. Isn't post-modern to do with quotation?

Fragment 4. In the family-owned fabric shops between Commercial Road and Queen Street, zebra velvets talk to cowhide cotton across floor displays of glazed Nigerian Damask, Zimbabwe Javaprint and Kenyan, Swazi and West African geometrics. Spread in the sun the pavement couturiers offer heady mixtures of Chinese lace, leopard, and missionary indigo print. My head fills with this happy tangle of images. Sparkle Organza and Twinkle Satin, holograph sequins by the metre, Czechoslovakian beads, miniature mica mirrors with silk embroidered edging, Zubeida's mendhi pattern books. Here in Grey Street, India and Africa exchange thoughts and Europe joins the conversation. Curtains and blinds, screen and hide, cover and reveal, in house, shop, temple, theatre and church, sacred and ordinary, rich and commonplace, handmade or cut from cloth kilometres long. I see objects with many memories buried in their skin. They talk of the mix-and-match, the cut-and-paste society we are becoming, eclectic, puzzling, optimistic and brash.

See, Etienne, we have company. There is that word again. Eclectic.

I've not yet asked. Just assumed. Will your music be performed? Is that the way your professors will assess it? Or do they simply read your score and the lyrics? And if it is produced as a musical on stage, will it have sets and costumes, and lights, and everything else? And who will play? Who will sing? This is something that we have never talked about. And I am so, so filled with curiosity. I can feel the thing forming. Taking shape. Becoming real. Not just an idea. Not just an exercise. No longer abstract. But real. Something that we will see with our own eyes and hear with our ears. Do you know how exciting that is?

Dearest Etienne : I am so glad you loved it. No, I have no idea where it came from. I cut things from the newspaper and magazines and throw them into a box. There are so many leads for you to follow. Nigeria, India, Java.

If you are scoring music for exotic ethnic instruments, who will you get to play them? Sitar players, if not exactly two a penny here in Durban, at least exist. But gamelan players? I love the idea of all those gongs and chimes, and eastern cymbals. Your grandmother, whose name I find hard to let past my lips, she used to talk about their times in Indonesia and marathon concerts, all day and most of the night. The Chinese violin? And we'll need Chinese woodblocks for percussion.

The mbira? I can begin to hear the sounds in the very names.

I sensed that it was time for something autobiographical. I'm vain enough to want to appear somewhere, not get lost under the layers of other things, however sumptuous they might be. I have this picture in my mind of an ancient woman floating on a bright Li-Lo while her words are intoned to the beating of a gong. Is it possible to have a tank of water on stage? The image of this mummy-like figure, all crepe paper skin tightly stretched over bone, inert on scarlet tubing would be quite something.

I was seventy-three. That morning I climbed down to the rocks and sat and waited for the sun. Watching that great thing leap out of the water and set the waves on fire was like the first day. The Creation. Not that I was there myself - though at times it feels as if I were. And when I meet this reptile in the mirror, the doubts creep in. But for those few moments I was young again. Young! The water was sharp. I can still feel it. May is sometimes more like winter than autumn. It was last year. Last year. There was nobody else in sight. It was my beach. The dunes were still red as I climbed to the top and walked home. How I loved that flat! As small as a cupboard but it was mine. And from the window I could look down and there it was, spread below. My beach. My sea. My world. I asked for nothing more. I needed nothing. Take the sea away from me and you'll kill me. Who did I say that to? My daughter? Raymond? Perhaps. Someone. And then it all happened. So suddenly. So suddenly.

Of course, I've taken some licence. I've added some years. More effective visually, don't you think, to have a very old woman floating on a Li-Lo, as opposed to just an old one? And I've moved myself from the Berea to the beachfront.

My dearest dearest Etienne : The sadness of Hector's death came back a moment ago. I was checking a spelling in the dictionary and happened to come across DOG. I thought the wound had healed. And there I was, my eyes flooding with tears. The pain never gets less but one learns to deal with it better. Strange how it creeps up from behind and catches you off-guard and the memories return. But I'm getting off the point. Reading the list of words with dog as a prefix, I began playing with a list that might or might not develop into an anthem of sorts. A chant, I don't suppose there is any way of incorporating barking sounds? A couple of barks between each word? I seem to remember that there are certain musical noises that dogs are allergic to, that make them howl. Must be a certain pitch of note? Is there the germ of an idea for you? If none of this is of any use, it will, nonetheless have served another purpose. A private moment of mourning for a dear, dear creature.

DOG-CHEAP, DOG DAYS, DOGSBODY, DOGFACE, DOG HOUSE, DOG-STAR, DOG-WATCH, DOG FIGHT, DOG ROSE, DOG SLEEP...

Thoughts of my own mortality came to me. There is a wonderful line that returned in this dog filled reverie, BURY ME WHERE THE BIRDS WILL SING OVER MY GRAVE. I did that for Hector. How I miss him. How I miss my home. I hope the heathens have not chased the birds away.

You do know that Hector was from the Egyptian Circus? I saw his picture in the Mercury one Saturday. There were originally twelve performing dogs and they were all rescued by some animal welfare group here. Six went to Zimbabwe and the others came here. He was the last one left at the SPCA. An adorable animal. But so full of anxieties and pains and trauma he didn't move for two whole days when I got him home. So much so I wondered at times if he was paralysed. And mute. Not a sound. And then on the third day, like Lazarus, he rose from the dead.

He'd been on the road for seven years, all the way down Africa. He saw more of the continent than I, or you, or anyone else I can think of, will ever see. When the circus got to Mozambique, disaster happened. They ran out of money. Who's going to go to a circus when you don't have two brass farthings for food.

Anyway, the man who owned the circus, said he'd go back to Cairo and charter a boat to take them home. What they didn't know was that he was not Egyptian. Not a diplomat. But a Bulgarian, and a gunrunner. Dealing in drugs on the side. Whoever would think of looking in a tiger's cage.

Anyway, they were rescued. The Barbary lions went to a game farm in Limpopo. The tigers to Pongola. The pythons to the Snake Park here. And Hector ended up at 142 Bellevue Road. Such a darling animal. He did wonderful tricks. Could walk on his hind legs. Twirl. And he loved heights.

Now THERE is material for a musical. Imagine the costumes.

It's been good just remembering him. Please, please, Etienne, let's give him a tiny part. A walk-on part. We'd find the dog. He was exactly like the one in the Picasso drawings of the acrobats. Exactly.

"Hot water, Miss Mary."

"You're an angel, my dear. What on earth would I do without you, Mavis? And the new packet of tea is over there."

"'Power' ... 'and riches' ... 'and wisdom' ...
'and strength' ..."

"You know it too, Miss Mary!"

"Handel and I have been friends for goodness knows how long."

"It's from The Messiah, Miss Mary."

"I know, my child. I was there when he wrote it."

"But Miss Mary isn't ..."

"So, tell me, Mavis, dear, are you getting on well with the piece?"

"It's not easy but we work hard. Mrs Sibisi is clever."

"Mrs Sibisi?"

"She lives next door. She did music at school. She's worked out of the music for us and the children."

"I'm sure dear George Frederic would be very pleased with her. He was quite fond of messing about with his own tunes himself."

"We practice with a tape. So we can listen to ourselves. Mrs Sibisi says it's the best way to learn."

"I'm sure she's right. I'd love to listen to the tape sometime, my dear."

"When we are better."

"You promise?"

"I promise. And this is for you."

"The table cloth?"

"I promised."

"It's the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. How did you know I loved turquoise and cerise?"

"I didn't, Miss Mary. I'm happy. I like them too."

"And these flowers, and this bird and the trees. It's all so wonderful."

"The flowers are in my garden and the tree is the Paw-Paw. Your tree."

"Of course! Before it was murdered."

"Before Wiseman and Mrs de Jager. Yes."

"I'll treasure this. Such happy colours. It lights up this dreary room. How exquisite."

"And you can wash it, Miss Mary."

"You mean when I upset my food on it like those other demented creatures. Like the poor sad Countess next door."

"When it gets dirty. Everything gets dirty."

"I'm sorry, my dear, that was rude of me."

"I'm happy when I'm making these. It's not like work. We use our minds. We have to think."

"They are beautiful. You must make more, Mavis. Lots more."

"Oh, we do. We work very hard on the weekends. The time is too short. We make them together and Miss Greta sells them for us. We share the money. And it means we can buy more cloth and more colours."

"You are wasted here. You must think about the future. That's where you are lucky. You have one. All I have is a past."

"It's hard with the children."

"You promised to tell me about them."

"The youngest is five."

"And the oldest?"

"Miranda is twenty three. She's a school teacher in Ladysmith. Mary is twenty one and she is still at school. She wants to be a health worker. Andrew is in matric. The second time. He failed last year. There was some trouble. With a girl. She had a baby."

"A baby! So you are a grandmother?"

"I didn't choose."

"And nor did I. And the child? Tell me about the child."

"She lives with us. They wouldn't take it."

"They?"

"Her family."

"So the girl stays with you too and looks after the child?"

"She stays, yes. But she is at school too. Everyone needs education today. She leaves the baby with Mrs Sibisi. I pay Mrs Sibisi. She's good. She takes lots of children."

"Mrs. Sibisi has a crèche?"

"A room and another room. Her house. And a small garden. There's nobody at home during the day. I leave at five to get here. And it's sometimes dark when I get home."

"And the money, Mavis? How do you manage?"

"Money's a problem. It's just Miranda and me."

"And your husband?"

"Husband! I don't believe in men. Trouble. Only trouble. I told him to go after the last one."

"A woman after my own heart, Mavis."

"It's hard, but we manage. And you have helped me, Miss Mary."

"My dear girl. I had no idea."

"It's better now with the table cloths. And soon Mary will be working ..."

"If nothing happens to her along the way. But I've lost count."

"There's Innocent and Sandy. He's my favourite, he's always smiling. And Floyd. Another girl, Jessica and another girl, Hopefulness. And then there's Leonard. He's in gaol, like his father."

"Gaol?"

"Not the same one. And it's not the same father I told to go. The last one. Innocent and Sandy's father is not the same as Leonard's. And Floyd's father is the same as Mary's. Miranda's was my first. He died. An accident. In the mine."

"Dear God! I've led a sheltered life! Not that I thought so until today. You poor, dear creature. How do you manage to remain so cheerful?"

"It doesn't help to be sad, Miss Mary."

"I can see that I have to take you in hand. You obviously can't cope. We must plan."

"Thank you, Miss Mary. You are nice. But I can cope."

My dearest Etienne : You will think that I have gone crazy. But let me explain. Mavis was telling me yesterday about her children. And she is teaching them English. So, here is my contribution. Mrs Sibisi says they need something that has rhythm, rhyme and repetition. When you read it aloud you will hear the rhythm. It's silly, I suppose, it's all about things children will find around them and then can put a name to.

RUGS, BUGS AND MUGS
LIPS, PIPS AND SLIPS
FLOWERS AND TOWERS
FABLES AND TABLES
FLOORS, DOORS AND SHORES
BOYS, TOYS AND NOISE
GIRLS AND PEARLS
RATS AND CATS
HEATERS, METRES AND CHEETAHS
SEWING, MOWING AND THROWING
BREAD AND BUTTER
DIRT AND CLUTTER
NITS AND NUTS
BITS AND BITES
KITES AND KITS
MUMS AND MITS
SHELLS, BELLS AND BULLS
TRAINS, CRANES AND PLANES
RAMS, DAMS AND CLAMS
GNATS AND KNOTS
FISH AND CHIPS
SHEEP AND SHIPS
SKY AND PIE
ONE AND SUN
TWO AND BLUE
THREE AND TREE
FOUR AND DOOR
HEAD, BED, RED AND Z.

What about the Cambodian nursery rhyme you once talked about for the music. Or what about each stanza set to music from a different place? No, that would be too much of a fruit salad. Mind you...

Mavis says she would love to be in your production. Please, she asks, would you include some gospel music? And she says that she would love to make the costumes. She's got really imaginative ideas. Lots of handpainted fabric like the table-cloths decorated with bright woollen pom-poms which the younger children have just learned to make from Mrs Sibisi. I don't know if she is talking about the whole show or just their section. She's left already. It's such a long way home, two buses and then a quarter of an hour on foot. And it's not safe towards evening, so she likes to be prompt. I'll have to ask her tomorrow. Either way it would be good for her. A challenge. And a new opening. This woman – she's Danish I gather – Greta Jensen, is very diligent and a tower of strength. But she's trapped in craft and that can be limiting. Mavis has ambition and sees more to life than tablecloths. There is an artist longing to get out. Greta's low church and handicraft is part of her creed of Salvation. I, on the other hand, veer towards Beauty – with John Ruskin's capital letters – Beauty as a way of liberation. I've not clapped eyes on the good Greta but have a mental picture of pink flesh, blue eyes and German print.

What I like best about her is her independence. She never belonged to anybody but herself. She made her own rules. She didn't bother with the small-type. I remember once, it must have been after the war, she was in Cape Town and she was on a bus and happened to sit in the section reserved for Coloureds. Or so she said. The conductor came up to her and said, 'Excuse me, Madam, this part of the bus is for Coloureds.' She turned very slowly and looked right at him and said, 'I know. I am.' And went on sitting. There was nothing he could do. Sometimes I wondered if she didn't go one way simply because everyone was going the other.

My dearest Etienne : That last idea of the list of childrens' words, set off another one. Remember the buses with names like THE DIVINE WIND, MAHARANI'S PRIDE, KRISHNA'S EXPRESS, AFRICAN QUEEN, HARD RAIN and others? Pure poetry. Folksy stuff. Well they've been overtaken – literally and figuratively – by the taxis. The buses are the Plain Janes, the taxis the Glamour Boys. They now have the best names, and I've dredged up a few from the recesses of my failing memory, which to my joy I discover is more agile than I thought. Mavis has given me some more. And various others of her extended family are on the lookout as we speak, pad and pen in hand. Here, to begin the ball rolling is my **TAXI LITANY**

AVENGER, REVENGER, BOOM BOOM, TOMB RAIDERS, SPACE INVADERS, MOMMY'S TITTY BOY, DICE WITH DEATH, COME RIDE WITH ME, FLIRT, SOUND LAB, WIND DANCER, NEAT DOG, WARM DOG, NICE DOG, COAST 2 COAST, NO SECOND CHANCES, CHEMISTRY, HEARTBREAKER, RISKY BUSINESS, NOTORIOUS TYCOON, SNOOPY DOGG, HOOCHIE MAMA, WHIPLASH, DESTINY, DLX SLAMDUNK, DREAM MACHINE, RED DEVIL, DIRTY DEALER, WICKED ILLUSION. TEMPTATION, RAGS 2 RICHES, RELOAD MATRIX, SENSATIONS, VICIOUS, CONTAGIOUS, AWESOME, POISON, BEDROOM BULLY, CUTE ONE, EXTERMINATOR, CAUSING CHAOS, KURUPT, PIRANAH, PURE PLEASURE, MAC DADDY, TWISTER, MA BAKER, X TREMES, DA PUZZLER, CARLITOS WAY, ANOTHER LIFE, PUMP DA BASE, WILD WILD WEST, NIGERIAN TERROR, SCREAM, SUGAR DADDY, DEMOLITION MAN, PLAYBOY ON BOARD, DOLL EYES.

Whether they inspire music is a problem I pass on to you. Whether they can be cobbled into the plot is yet another matter. I wonder if the words should be chanted rather than sung, over a repeating two line melody. Rap, I suppose is what I'm getting at, allergic to it as I am. You will know. It's presumptuous of me to interfere.

"There's a story going round, Edna, that she's left everything to Mavis."
 "There's a story round that she wants to adopt Mavis. Legally."
 "That's ridiculous, Edna. She's not an orphan. She has a perfectly good mother and I suppose a father. Somewhere. Well I suppose she has a mother and father. Everyone has."
 "You don't think she would dare leave everything to Mavis, do you? Not everything."
 "It wouldn't surprise me. Nothing would surprise me, Edna. But I shouldn't think there's anything to leave. Mavis has most of it already."
 "It's revenge."
 "Of course, Edna, of course. She wants to see that there's nothing for Daphne. But you're right about Mavis. There's something going on between them."
 "When it comes to plotting she'd give the Borgias a run for their money."
 "Last week she got me to draw a thousand rand out of her building society. She was very cagey, Edna, very cagey. Said she had read about a project in some black area that needed helping. They need capital. It's some home industry. Craft. Textiles. Something like that."
 "Karl Marx and Marie Antoinette are an odd mixture."

“She wanted two thousand but it was on thirty days. Got quite snooty with me, Edna, as if it was my fault. I asked if it had anything to do with Mavis and I could see that veil coming over her eyes. Mavis has taken over. Everything is Mavis. It’s an obsession.”

My dearest Etienne : I am thrilled that you liked the TAXI LITANY and that you have added a handful of your own from Gauteng. Mavis tells me that the names are regional. No, that is not quite the right word. What she said is that you get a certain set of names which belong to a particular area. Those in the know will immediately recognise a taxi from Umlazi by its name. And there’ll be different districts within the township. Phoenix will have its sets of names, KwaMashu, Lamontville, Chesterville, Chatsworth and so on and so on. It’s a veritable sub-culture, to use the present jargon which I try to avoid, but my mind cannot conjure an alternative as I write this.

There seems to have been more time than there usually is to sit and think. Good can come from anything. It’s not a bad thing to be reminded that one is mortal. The fall was a warning, Mavis said. A message, yes. Not a threat. I didn’t see it that way, but she, dear soul, continues as ever to protect me, usually from them and now from myself. God was in His Boy Scout mood, BE PREPARED, He said. Everyone has their own way of preparing. One should always be ready just in case. It was with these wandering thoughts of here, now, and there, later, that I clamped my earphones on the other night to listen to Bruce Millar. The earphones were not out of deference to the inmates, but a defence against them. Gone was the wheezing, the monkey chatter, the tinkling bells like a High Catholic Mass from numbers 4 and 8, the Victoria Falls cistern, and the percussion of doors. He played Joseph once upon a very far time, and charming he was too, boyish and dimpled. Seems to have done little since, and occasionally reminds us of that one moment. He can be forgiven his disappointment. To reach the summit after so short a climb at twenty-five and then be condemned through your thirties and forties and fifties to watching Everest but never getting near must be saddening. Anyway, amongst the things he’d chosen were songs and words which talked of death and loss and memory and regret and nostalgia, though fortunately more of the first and little of the latter. I wrote an email to him afterwards to say how clever he’d been to avoid the mawkish and sentimental. Patience Strong is such an easy trap to fall into. But the real reason was this wonderful poem by a woman who had five or so years back become a widow.

**I knew you were dead
When the notices stopped in the newspaper**

**I knew you were dead
When I had to take my car for a service**

**I knew you were dead
When I had to change the light bulbs**

**I knew you were dead
When there were no anniversary presents
No one put petrol in my car
No one kissed me goodbye
Phoned me every day at twelve
Brought home the evening paper
Made the morning tea
Hugged me on the stairs
Made me laugh every day
Discussed our children
Loved Sulka ties
Biscuits and chocolates**

French Burgundys
Beef Wellington
Spanish omelettes
Brussels sprouts
Trains
Me

"We don't give the telephone number of contributors," Bruce said. But I knew I could wear him down. "You won't know me," I said. "I wish I did," she replied, "you sound delightful." "Thank you my dear. You have a very young voice." "Don't be fooled," she said, "I may be older than I sound, but not as young as I'd like to be." "We are all older than we used to be, but I have no wish to turn back the clock." It is the way she noticed the everyday things that ninety-nine percent of the rest of us wouldn't that thrilled me. Genius when you think about it. She's changed my way of seeing. Now I find myself looking at every object in the room with suspicion. Is that cup just a cup or is it hiding something? This shabby blanket like a moulting goat: does it have secrets? That scrap of carpet with its back coming through the front, will it speak if I listen carefully enough? This chair with its old-man stubble arm-pads? The cheese? This bowl of figs? Everything may be harbouring a secret. Things may not be what they appear.

It all reminds me of the time, many moons ago, when I still drove and went to that not so opulent temple on the hillock overlooking the Springfield desolation. I was standing there, thinking I was all alone, looking at these two exquisite tiny women with their alabaster skin and Benares regalia, the one glittering in white, the other in red. You know when you sense there is someone around and there he was this slightly run-down priest who appeared from nowhere. "Who are they?" I asked, more in surprise than because I really wanted to know. Though in retrospect I was glad of the question, for his answer, just like Hannah's poem, changed my way of looking forever. "They are just two women," he said. "No they are not, they are Goddesses. Saraswati and Laxmi." I smiled, and said nothing, for I could see more wisdom approaching. "In fact, they are sisters." My smile encouraged further truths. "Actually, they are the same person." In thirty seconds I'd had a lesson in the dualities of Hinduism, and the way the ordinary and the sublime go hand in hand every second of the day. IF you are prepared to see it.

Apparently Hannah Lurie lives just round the corner and has promised to visit me. I really look forward to that. I told her about you and our project. "My father was an operatic pianist," she said. And her mother sang. Vaudeville, I think she said. She's a whole book of poems she's done. They steal up on her, she says, and take her by surprise. We might use some of them, I said, in our musical. Listen to me, OUR musical. Well, Etienne, that is a compliment. And I mean it most sincerely, for it too has changed the way I see things. You have. I find myself examining everything to see if it has musical potential. And if it hasn't I bid it a swift farewell. I'm sure you'll find a place for Hannah. She sounds to me a natural performer. We really are, you and I, gathering around us the most remarkable pantheon of ideas. If, ideas are able to inhabit a pantheon. But then, why not?

"You talk about "those organisations" Aunt Mary. What organisations do you mean?"

"I've done a bit of scouting about and I've managed to track down one which appeals. It's a group of women in KwaMashu. They do craft-work and have had some success. Painting on cloth with coloured dyes. They make all sorts of things. Table cloths. Serviettes. Lengths of fabric for dresses and curtains. Most enterprising. There are eleven women and they have someone doing the selling for them. It's one of those co-operatives. They cut up the profits into equal slices and they are all making a living. They've orders from all over the country. And they are hoping to get something going overseas. They've sent samples and have had a good response."

"You've certainly done your homework, Aunt Mary. This wouldn't by any chance have something to do with Mavis?"

"Mavis?"

"Yes. Mavis."

"Mavis who?"

"Aunt Mary, it's me you're talking to, remember. Not Gladys de Wet or one of your other crazies from Mon Repos."

"Oh. Mavis? How clever of you to guess. She's doing wonderfully well. They've found a small place in town – well, not right in town – in Umbilo. Nothing smart, I gather, but big enough and airy, on the top floor of a factory. They want to set up a proper workshop, get some good worktables and some drying racks and, if all goes well, they want to buy a couple of industrial sewing machines. They can't go on working at home. Not if they are going to expand. And it makes sense being independent."

"So?"

"And so I was thinking that I could help them with the rent. If there is enough, I'd like to lend them the money so that they can take out a three year lease. That way they can plan for the future."

"Lend? Aunt Mary?"

"Of course. You know I don't believe in charity. You must draw up a proper agreement for me. They can be paying it back in three years. Or even a little later ... Depending on how things go. I've done my sums and I'm certain we can make it. Please be a dear and check with the Building Society. And I think there are some shares. Though perhaps not too many the way I've been selling them to pay for this and that ..."

"Without sounding morbid, Aunt Mary. What if ..."

"What if I die before they start paying? With a little bit of luck I might do just that. It's in the lap of the gods. Or somebody's lap anyway."

"You know how much the lease is, Aunt Mary?"

"Well, of course. It's my money I'm losing, not my mind. I've written it down somewhere ..."

"And if there's not enough, Aunt Mary?"

"Ah. If there's not enough, I have a plan up my sleeve. You remember Edna McNab?"

"What a silly question, Aunt Mary, I talk about her all the time."

"I'm glad you remember her. Well, Edna happened to drop in to see me the other morning ..."

"Good heavens! Edna? She didn't tell me Aunt Mary, she didn't say a word..."

"No, I didn't expect she would have. I've not seen her for aeons. Pleasant woman. I think she's been away. We talked a bit about money. And about a lot of other things too. Sweet woman. She's married to this dear man, oodles of cash, and, apparently, something of a philanthropist. And, now dear boy, you must please promise that if I toddle off before the middle of the month, you'll remember to get a refund. They make us pay in advance here. I can't tell you how much satisfaction it gives me to know the scavengers won't get a thing. I'd love to be a fly on the wall when they see the will."

"They, Aunt Mary?"

"Them. The family."

"Family?"

"You know who I mean. See that she is there. Daphne. And please be there too. There's only one line. 'You may go home now. The show is over.' It is all so delicious. I'm actually feeling a little impatient about getting going. No. Don't worry. I have no intention of leaving just yet."

My dearest Etienne : I didn't know then but I'm beginning to know now that poetry is a cut-throat business in these parts. Not as many followers as soccer, but every bit as competitive, and Hannah, it seems, is one of the key players, somebody quite special in poetry circles here. So I

think we are lucky to have snapped her up for our musical before she joins the national bunfight. I was delighted when Mavis brought this to me this morning. Apparently it was slipped under the door in the annexe last evening.

**Sitting on clouds
angels endlessly sort
delete messages
in cyber space.
They file love messages
and in their wisdom
try to reconcile
quarrelling couples.
Sometimes, like us
they get it wrong
and push the wrong buttons
and sometimes
the wrong couples
make better couplings
Boring technical stuff
gets recycled into rain
and advertorial
into toilet rolls
Hate mail
goes straight to hell
and the senders
develop diarrhoea and dandruff
Empathetic text messages
become plants
and chocolate coated almonds
and sarcastic and nasty ones
get returned to sender
over and over and over again
until, crazed and hopeless
they eventually apologise
Fomentors of war emails
are hacked into at source
and punished by having
their bank accounts
frozen forever.
The Managing Director
of "Spirit Kingdom dot com"
smiles on her chosen -
she presses "send"
Heaven has entered the
21st Century.**

My head has been spinning. What kind of music would you do for it? Spinning because it seems such an opportunity for something that rhymes with the idea of the poem and I'm too ignorant to know what it is I'm thinking of. I suppose what I'm fumbling for is something that has nothing to do with pianos or violins. No musical instruments at all. Just those funny computer sounds. Electronic, is that the term? And perhaps the voice could be the same. The Vodacom lady who tells you to leave a message.

Electronics. The internet. Virtual this and virtual that. Invisible wonders all beyond my comprehension.

And so when people say that there is no God I simply use the analogy of the radio. Here we are, sitting in air that is thick with sounds but we hear nothing. We need that tiny box of transistors and suddenly there is Alistaire Cook doing his Letter from America or dear clever Richard Haslop rambling on about some fascinating band in Cape Town nobody but he has ever heard of. And the air is full of pictures too, moving pictures, swimming around us all the time, people being killed in some dreadful bombing, Hollywood, Bollywood and more. The Mona Lisa and Bart Simpson all rushing round endlessly to appear magically on our screen when we press the button. Not that I'll be pressing any buttons with my television firmly under Gladys' control. But, be that as it may, I'm getting off the point. There are things out there beyond the comprehension of our too limiting brains. But I'll remain forever skeptical and optimistic because even the great Hindu ascetics who manage to exist on two dried plums and a few drops of water have only just begun to scratch the surface. The world of spirits and the unexplained must wait until we are ready. I'm still wrestling with Darwin. If altruism is what makes the difference between humans and animals, I suspect he's got it wrong. I don't see much of it around. Animals kill for food. We appear to do it for fun. It's a toss of the coin, but I think I'd put my money on animals. Darwin's a black hole for me. I don't even begin to try to understand email. Hannah's little poem really did touch a raw nerve.

My dearest Etienne : I was fascinated to read of clever Professor Khumalo at your University and his thesis on CONTEMPORARY URBAN NOMENCLATURE IN SOUTH AFRICA 1920 – 2000. What a hateful word, but what an intriguing idea. You must promise to send me a copy when it is published. I'll just look at the pictures, if you know what I mean, skip all the academic nonsense and enjoy his lists of names.

This fragment I've called **UMLAZI/BEREA/STUTTAFORDS** It is based on something that happened about ten years ago, during the changes.

“Of course, you may sit here. I'm by myself.” Gladys moves the teapot and her plate a fraction as a gesture of welcome. “What a pretty child!” The woman sits. “What is his name?” “It's a girl. Her name is Gugu.” “I'm Mrs de Wet. Pleased to meet you.” Gladys fiddles once again with the crockery. “And you are?” “Veronica.” “Gladys.” A few words pass between them. Gladys drinks her tea and finishes her caramel cupcake. A waiter arrives and takes the woman's order. Gladys searches her head for another sentence but none arrives. Coffee and biscuits arrive. Smiles are exchanged. “I've never seen Stuttafords so full,” Gladys says. The woman smiles, pours coffee and nibbles a shortbread biscuit. Gladys signals for her bill. The woman undoes her blouse and there are contented noises from Gugu. Gladys looks away and catches the waiter's eye. “May I?” the woman asks, reaching for the sugar bowl. “Of course, my dear,” Gladys replies, handing it to her. The woman dips her nipple into the sugar. There are more happy gurgling sounds from Gugu. “I'll pay at the desk,” Gladys says, getting up hurriedly, “otherwise I'm going to miss my bus...”

I've wondered at odd moments whether it was this tiny incident that was the catalyst that finally tipped poor dear Gladys over the edge into madness. She'd been teetering on the edge looking down for a while. Some people have welcomed the changes. Others have been Canutes. For none of us has it been easy, though I for one, seeing things from the other side, would never wish to return to the bad old days.

I'd suggest a parody on TEA FOR TWO, but, again, dear Etienne, I would not dare tread on the hallowed turf of your creativity. It would be nice though.

"There's nobody here ... They're determined to kill you with noise in this place. They'd hate you to die in peace."

"It's me, Miss Mary. Me."

"You! My dear, dear girl, come in."

We can't stay, Miss Mary. Sister said we mustn't disturb you."

"Disturb me! They do nothing else. FRAIL CARE! That is another lie."

"You are fighting. You must be well. It's good, Miss Mary."

"I'll be out in a day or two. It was only a tiny fall. It's not as if I broke my hip or anything. The fracture was so tiny they needed a magnifying glass to see it on the X-Ray. It would be a waste to die with this miserable lot. Come, my dear and sit here where I can see you."

"You must rest, Miss Mary."

"The children wanted to see you."

"What a surprise! All of them?"

"Some, Miss Mary, only some."

"Well that's a lot more than my real family. One must be grateful. They've spared me their comfort."

"Jessica ... Innocent ... And this is Sandy. Here's Leonard. And Mary. Hopefulness. And this is Miranda. The children have a present for you Miss Mary. They're going to sing you your favourite, George Frederic Handel."

"Blessing and honour, glory and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne and unto the Lamb forever ..."

My very, very dearest Etienne : I am consumed with curiosity. The CD has arrived. How very sweet of you to send it by courier. Did you think I might have been swept off in the Fiery Chariot before it arrived had you sent it Fastmail? Thank you for being so kind, knowing my impatient nature.

I am longing to hear it, but have promised myself that the occasion needs proper celebration. This great moment must be given all the flourish of a State Occasion. OUR MUSIC, and I use the upper case purposely, OUR MUSIC is a milestone in the life of our new democracy, (lower case intended, for accuracy only, new supposes an old democracy which there never was).

I have invited a few friends, and a couple of acquaintances this evening. And Mrs de Jager, simply because of my belief in the power of music to change lives. Beauty is a force. Just as ugliness is, And I refuse to accept that there is a living soul who cannot be redeemed, not a life that cannot be transformed.

So, Etienne, we will meet in the lounge, unlovely though it is, for cocktails at 6.30. Mrs de Jager has got the kitchen to prepare snacks. This will happen on the verandah as the forecast is for showers only very much later.

Edna will be here, Estee Lauder and spruce, with her new husband, who has turned out to be a most generous and charming man. Not as cultivated as I would have thought Edna would have wanted, but let that be. Kind to her and companionable. Your step-grandfather, of course. If such a creature exists. Mavis and some of her children, those who belong to the choir and have a taste for music. A few of the inmates - those who can sit for more than five minutes and those who do not fall asleep instantly and those who are more or less compis mentis. And dear Hannah, of course, who is just the sweetest person you could wish for.

And, round 7.15, we will play your music. You say that the singing is not quite up to scratch and that we should make allowances. A first draft you call it. I cannot wait. It is now 10 in the morning and a whole afternoon stretches ahead.

My dearest, my very dearest Etienne: I thought I was too old for tears. But my face is damp. How could you, how could you be so very very sweet? That you will be here this afternoon, is something I could never have dreamed of. Would NEVER have dreamed of. Your flight is at 2.30 so you'll be here at around four. Please see that they don't have one of those apprentice pilots I was reading about just this weekend in the Tribune. That nice Mrs Lurie, dear Hannah, has offered to pick you up at the airport.

- *Andrew Verster*