

**and
the
hummingbird
beats
her
wings**

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[Inside the Loquat Tree]

No one can find Liezl here. And right now, no one cares where she is, either. The heat of her parents' rage – as they shout at each other in their bedroom, next to hers – obliterates everything else.

When she heard something hit the wall (she'd rather not know what it was) – that's when she pushed the quilt off herself, jumped up and ran without pausing to the tree. Her tree.

She climbed, barely looking – she's done it so many times, she's a pro. Even so, her knee scraped a rough knob rising out of the smooth bark: it's bleeding slightly now. A year or two ago, when she was seven, eight, that would've made her cry. But she's nine now, and big girls don't cry. Her lips tremble. She shifts a little, trying to find a more comfortable posture on her favourite bough, one that's even bigger than her dad's biceps and roughly horizontal to the ground below.

Somewhere in the thick tangle of branches and leaves above her, a sleepy dove is calling: "Grandfather, work harder. Grandfather, work harder." At least that's what her grandma says the dove is saying. She leans back till her back is fully flush. Shards of sky wink at her like diamonds. She's dizzy – she drank some of the brandy near the end of lunch. It was late, everyone was happy – loudly joking and laughing in the lounge. No one noticed those quick, furtive sips she took among the messy plates in the dining room.

A motorcycle on the highway – she can hear its snarl tearing through the late afternoon's quiet. As her eyes grow heavy, she imagines being on it, racing somewhere, maybe to the beach where

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Sleuthing on Google yesterday revealed that these (*Echinium pininana*, AKA the tree echium or giant viper's-bugloss) are endemic to La Palma in the Canary Islands. There they grow in laurel forests – forests that have shrunk enough to result in the plants being listed as endangered. In his garden on the other side of the world, though, they're anything but – exuberantly rampant, probably displacing more fragile natives. It seems almost unbelievable that these dazzling towers, so alive – and having so rudely, eerily, oppressively captured this landscape – won't be here for much longer. As biennials, they can't escape their fate: death after flowering. In a year from now, all that remains will be the wizened stem, and perhaps the wispy ghosts of former leaves – awaiting the shears of the landscaper who comes monthly.

He's not thinking about all this as he writes, of course. He's thinking about death, pain, cruelty – the usual. He has a headache, something elusive and buzzing, from his too-strong coffee or last night's red wine – or both. It feels like more than that, though – like a throbbing rebuke, a gentle punishment for his bucolic surroundings, for the deceptive, quiet simplicity of them.

He writes. More hard words, laying them like stones to form a wall of sentences.

And then, he both sees and hears the frantic, unignorable grace of a hummingbird's wings. With dainty precision she dips her slender beak into one of the tiny blue flowers right in front of him. She's smaller than his palm, her wings a blur, a smudge of brown against the sky's dirty white.

She darts off again: mission accomplished.

she'd dance in the waves before getting a vanilla soft-serve from the Total garage in Blouberg.

Her eyes blink open again: a door has slammed – Mom or Dad? A car's engine starts, but she's not sure whose.

[The Job]

Cindy's wedged her ass up against the skinny maple, which juts with jaunty defiance out of the sidewalk. She can't keep still but, because she must, she lets her fingers play with the settings on her camera.

She was afraid, but she came anyway. Because she must bear witness. Because, although the paper furloughed her in March, they've said they'll pay her \$50 per picture of hers that gets published. It's almost June 1 – rent's coming due, and although she wanted to, she didn't join the rent strike a few of the others are doing in the building; she's too afraid she'd get kicked out if she did that; then where would she and Maya go?

Right now, though, there are other, even more pressing things to think about. She raises the camera, trains the viewfinder on the chain of helmets, shields, batons: protectors of the people, the police. Hal!

Her stomach turns. She'd been too nervous to eat anything more than an apple. The Nikon feels even heavier than usual in her hands. When she started out, she used it for the events pages. She hated it – the product launches, the charity parties, her presence, and the pictures which resulted, were just a way of the paper sucking up to the city's businesses (though even all those pictures, published

every Thursday, hadn't been enough in the end to stem the

avalanche of cancelled ads). She had hated those evenings, when she felt like a cocktail waitress with a camera instead of a tray – local grandees asking her where the toilet was or if she could fetch their coat; she had wanted to capture images that mattered, capture moments of history.

And now she's here, and her knees are wobbling, and she hates them for it. Her sister Jean is looking after Maya (Jean's in her social bubble; it's the only way they could make sure each other could help out with babysitting when needs be).

"Relax, they're not going to shoot a blonde woman with a jacket saying *Press* on it," Jean said earlier. Clearly, the worry that Cindy had been so determined to hide from her sister had been on her face nonetheless. She had stared at her sister, had wanted to ask if she'd been under a rock the past two days but she didn't, she just gathered up her coat. Jean seemed to take her silence as an invitation to continue: "If anything, it's the protestors you have to worry about."

She did not reply to this either. She dashed through to Maya's bedroom to where the little girl was playing *Animal Crossing* on her iPad.

"Mommy! I thought you were going to work!"

Maya was grinning and frowning in concentration at the same time.

"I love you so much," Cindy said, kissing her on the forehead.

"So much. Be good for your Aunt Jean, OK?"

"Of course, Mommy."

both rejoiced. That was before the side-effects began. Dizzy, head-over-toilet nausea. The vomiting – spasms that continued long after it was bringing up nothing but gob. Pete no longer had any interest in food anyway – Zak had to bully him to accept even a mouthful of his erstwhile favourite, mashed banana. Then there was the sounds of the city, the city he used to love, the city that could throw *Pride* parties that he could happily sleep through. Now, even the distant chime of a cable car could wake him, and he would lie there for hours unable to return sleep.

All that – it was sort-of worth it initially; at least he seemed stronger. But then, all of a sudden, he wasn't, and they both knew – once more, his defences had been circumvented. Once more, a rout was beginning. Once more, they were near the end.

"I'm sorry," Zak says. "Of course we should try it. We can talk to him tomorrow?"

There's the rasp of skin moving against fabric. He glances over at Pete whose hands are now sliding outwards. His eyes flutter open.

"Want a bit of water?" asks Zak.

In reply: a grin – almost imperceptible, but a grin nonetheless.

[*Echium pininana*]

On this burning, bruised and broken Monday, he sits at the picnic table on the deck, writing. Ahead of him, several plants taller than the cabin curl up in tapering plumes to an invisible sun. Among the leaves circling a central stem are tiny purplish-blue flowers, so many of them.

"He's dropped off. The sister said he'd had a restless night so..."

Anyway, Zak thinks: what is there left to say? He likes Dr Rochelle but her presence here, her cautious words, just offer a reminder that they've lost, she and her colleagues have failed; science, medicine tried to gain the upper-hand with AZT but the drug had only – painfully – postponed the inevitable surrender. All they can do now is to try to prevent the worst of Pete's pain. Really. What is there left to say?

She lowers her papers.

"This is important. But I agree, we can let him sleep." She clears her throat. "Zak, I don't want to get your hopes up. But –"

"Please don't." (Did he actually say that? Or was he imploring her in his head?)

He turns away from her, turns towards the window. The water is glimmering, in communion with the full moon burning through the gauzy fog. Someone is running next to it. He envies the man's movement, his strength.

"We've just heard that new drugs have gotten emergency FDA approval. Protease inhibitors that will drastically suppress viral load. And we think that in conjunction *with* the AZT..."

She doesn't finish the sentence. After all, she doesn't want to put his hopes up.

"Don't you think Pete's been through quite enough?" he asks.

He tried to keep his anger buried but, to his embarrassment, a trace of it now stains the air.

She's trying her best. It's not her fault. And yet he's still angry.

She was the one who put Pete on AZT – and when she did they'd

Turning away from her, walking through that door, was even harder than it usually is. But she managed to, and that's why, of course, she's here: now with the camera trained on the protestors who are moving slowly and silently towards the police.

"Go home! Disperse!" yells one of the officers. The protestors ignore him. She focuses her lens on one: an elderly woman, eyes big above her surgical mask, in step with all the others. Could be a grandmother. Probably is.

"This. Is. Your. Last. Warning!" says the officer.

The protestors carry on walking.

[Schoolyard Games]

For a blissful moment – a moment he quickly feels ashamed of – all he can think about is sweat. The melting, incessant assault of it – pooling in the narrow gap between the back of his head and his helmet, sliding down his crack, tickling his balls, gooey in his armpits.

It's not yet 10, but the sun is already high, the sky ablaze, the air thick with heat and anger. They've been gathering at the entrance for hours now. Their chants seem to grow louder, more menacing as the crowd gets bigger. He doesn't know what they're saying, but he knows the intent of it, he knows what they want.

He tightens his hold on the semi-automatic but that too is sweaty – slippery in his fingers. (At least they're not carrying guns – but even so, the machetes they hold aloft are a force to be reckoned with. He's been in this Rwanda for long enough to have seen that.)

Now they're starting to rattle the chainlink that separates them from him. He glowers. Raises the gun ever so slightly so that its tip is pointing right at the sun. He has to pretend – that he's unafraid of them, that he's unafraid of shooting them if they force him to. The machetes ripple, raised and lowered, raised and lowered. He blinks extra-fast as if this would somehow erase them.

He trains his eyes from left to right; he rewards this display of vigilant resolve with a quick glance back at the school – chunky and unadorned; built by the Salesian Brothers and their flock decades before independence. He catches a whiff of fear – or maybe it's just the shit and piss from the tree near the building's edge where those seeking sanctuary here had to relieve themselves because the toilets had started overflowing.

His radio crackles. He's being relieved in a few minutes by Jacques; they're each doing three hour-stints out here at the gate; the rest of them are split between perimeter patrols and resting, out of the sun.

The fence rattles: the mass of bodies seem pressed up even closer so close that it's surely only a matter of time before they burst in. He steps forward – just a small step – mustering every bit of bravery he doesn't feel. They look at him with hate.

Please don't breach the gate, he thinks. Please don't breach the gate.

[Marine Layer]

She closes her eyes: it's too painful to keep them open.

"Wait here," she hears him say. "I am going to get you a glass of water."

[Blessed are the Peacekeepers]

The order to withdraw from the school came at noon; the soldiers are required to escort expatriates fleeing to the airport.

As they roll out of the compound, the crowds surge in past them. In the gloom of the armoured vehicle, Stefan can't seem them, but he can sense their bodies flowing past, he can hear their shouts – triumphant – above the din of the engine. He fights the urge to vomit; is grateful for the dark.

No one is talking. No one is looking at each other. The vehicles race onwards. When the screams begin, the soldiers are too far away to hear them.

[The Fog-eater]

Zak is in a chair by the window reading. Pete has already fallen asleep. He doesn't want to go in case he wakes up again – as unlikely as that is to happen. It is late, he should go, but he can't. Not yet.

The sound of heels clicking; he looks up from his book: it's Dr Rochelle coming into the ward, wielding a folder and a clipboard.

When she spots him in the corner she smiles.

"I'm glad you're here, Zak," she says, voice softer than tissue-paper. "I wanted to talk with you both."

her whole chest, inside and out, feels aflame, her eyes commiserate with tears but those can't douse the burning.

The rubber bullets continue to whizz past her, one hits the maple above her, the shouts and screams continue too.

She tries again: "PRESS!"

The word gets serrated in two – it is granted two syllables, one marking before the rubber bullet hits her leg, the other as fireworks of pain explode upwards.

The street's a blur – dissolving, pain. She keeps the camera almost-steady, keeps on shooting. And then: her leg gives way, pulling her down, she topples, catches the camera, cradles it. Lifting it up to capture a baton swinging down across the old woman. Kneeling with one good leg, presses the shutter again, framing the sudden stillness amidst so much movement.

She wants to go to the woman. She wants to hold her. But she doesn't. Wobbling, she gets to full height. A winching hobble (trying to ignore the pain, trying to ignore what she is leaving behind). From the maple to the shut double doors of a jewellery store (Hidden Treasure Jewels is emblazoned in faded lettering above the entrance). She shakes the handles. Nothing. Shakes them again. Keys scratch in the lock, one door is now ajar.

"I'm press, can I come in for a sec? To catch my breath?"

Quick burning blinks reveal a sliver of a face: lined, resolute.

"Please?"

The man puts down his baseball bat, opens it a little more for her to slither through. In the gloom, she sees his face in full: sad smile, hazelnut eyes, tall forehead disappearing into a turban.

In this war, Zak is just an interloper, a bystander completely unable to intervene. Still, Pete insists that his visits make the world of difference, make him feel better, stronger.

That's bullshit, though: the truth is undeniable, there is only one looming conclusion – and it isn't victory.

Zak dreams that one day he'll arrive and Pete will be pink-skinned and burly – just like he once was – but of course it's the opposite he's forced to observe: with each visit, he is a shade paler (as if that were even possible), an ounce lighter.

He pauses unseen by the door to steel himself. He wants to have the widest smile when he walks into the ward.

"Pete!"

He's in now.

Pete stirs slightly – otherworldly and swaddled in sheets like a desiccated alien mummy.

"Pete?"

Those eyes – the same eyes, still the same colour, the colour of the Aegean they swam in together – stare up at him. A slight frown creases Pete's waxen forehead.

"It's Zak"

Pete nods slightly, grimacing from the effort of doing so.

"Zak," Pete manages to whisper.

"Yes, it's Zak, Pete."

He takes Pete's hand, pebble-light, bony, coarse as sandpaper.

He holds it, glances away from his lips, which look like blue-bottles washed up on a summer beach.

He can feel Pete's pulse – beating against his own skin like taps of Morse.

He will not cry. He bites the inside of his mouth. He will not cry. “Zak,” croaks Pete again – and this time there's a flicker of recognition, of a smile.

For an eternity they stare at each other, Zak squeezing Pete's hand slightly as if, by doing so, some of his own life might be transferred to Pete's body.

A volley of squeals. Zak turns: beyond the window, a flock of gulls are scattering; with a couple flaps, each disappears into the fog.

[The Gloaming]

The policeman rings the doorbell just before seven. Liezl's mom wasn't so sure about letting him in – she's heard of criminals who dress in police uniforms; when you let them in they hold you up and take all your jewellery.

But she lets him in – this one has a kind face and, anyway, she's tired of being paranoid.

He gives her the news in the lounge, looked on by all the empty glasses from lunch that she is yet to begin hand-washing.

In the years ahead, she'll always remember his voice. Kind, like his face. Trying but sometimes failing *om suiwer Afrikaans te praat*. And yet, all the kindness in the world can't strip the facts of their violence. She flinches as he explains – her husband's car smashing into the concrete barrier separating the highway from the opposite flow of traffic. He was going so fast that he bounced back like a

billiard ball into the middle lane which is where he met the motorcyclist.

Groote Schuur Hospital was right next to the road but it wasn't close enough to save them.

“Mevrou, hulle was...”

(She is hugging her knees now. Her whole body is shaking.)

He doesn't know how to say it in Afrikaans, so he uses English to finish the sentence: “... dead on arrival.”

It's only then that she remembers, wordlessly leaving the policemen in the company of all those empty glasses, running – first to her daughter's bedroom and then, when she finds it empty, to the open French windows. She flicks on the outside lamp so she can see better.

“Liezl?”

There's a rustle. She steps forward hopefully – but it is just the neighbour's tabby in the bushes, en route to his nightly snack.

“Liezl!”

She steps onto the grass. Yelps *Fok!* as a thorn pricks her. She pulls it out of her big toe, tosses it towards the darkness. A bat swoops past and she ducks; that's when she sees the little body, absolutely still, crumpled at the base of the tree.

[Hidden Treasure]

Her yells are wasted. All they do is allow more tear gas to enter her lungs. Not even her mask can stop its insidious, burning progress –