LYING PERFECTLY STILL

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To all children living with HIV and AIDS.

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"If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."

- Indigenous Australian woman cited in "The Manilla Declaration on People's Participation and Sustainable Development" 1985

PART ONE

PROLOGUE

She slides the glass door open and steps onto the bathmat. She was born two months and twenty-two years ago. According to her horoscope, her quests for freedom and adventure are typical for her age. She grabs a towel, pats goosepimples dry. Black curls rest stole-like around her shoulders. The wiry mane gathered into one bunch; she turns. The mirror captures her plump cheeks; the broad nose she dislikes.

A line of gold glints around her neck. She toys with the fine chain bequeathed by her mother. Everything at the cottage soured when the cancer spread and took her mother's life. At sixteen, Koliwe's heart had shattered into icy shards. Then she went straight from washing up at the pub each night to Andrew's bed at the neighbouring farm and found refuge wrapped within his quietly spoken white limbs.

The nightdress beneath her feet is damp from the shower's spray. She forgot to bring clean clothes from her bedroom. Naked, she tiptoes along the landing. Moses' door opens. He wears his blue velvet dressing gown and is blowing his nose into his fingers. Father and daughter are face to face. Disgusted, Koliwe shrinks from him. Her right arm shoots across her breasts, her left hand cradles the triangle of hair beneath her belly.

Confronted by a naked daughter – what to feel? Where to look? Parts of her pear-shaped body he has not seen since she was about ten. She knows that scowl – the crow's feet splaying towards his temples; lines scoured either side of his lips; each tuck and pucker the texture and colour of a wrinkled prune. Moses glares at his daughter. She stumbles backwards until her buttocks brush the banister spindles. Moses shuffles backwards too. His breath reeks of last night's whiskey. His eyes divert to the tears of water dripping to the carpet from her hair.

She streaks to her bedroom faster than a hare to a burrow. Slams her door shut, slings on underwear, T-shirt; jiggles into jeans.

The springs squeak when she clambers onto the bed. Cupping her chin in both hands, she traces the blanket's detailed pattern spun by single threads. Threads entwine, brown blending with red as a tapestry spreads in folds and furrows, lying like the hills and hollows of the countryside woven into her life. She cannot bring Andrew back to the cottage. Because of her father. Wiping the wetness streaking her cheeks, she swallows the desire to flee. Her aim to help feed the world is naïve at best. Leaving England means breaking with Andrew. Yet the dream to escape, to find a new life, churns and grows, and cannot be supressed.

She rummages through drawers. Searching for what? Love is not stored here. Her mother's two-tone Chanel dress is wound around photographs taken at her parents' London wedding.

The first Christmas without her mother had all the wrappings with nothing inside.

"Why do you hate me?" her father had asked.

"I don't hate you."

Koliwe's feelings for him were frozen. *I feel iciness*, she had replied to herself.

She has waited for years for the thaw. Their jealously guarded grief is kept separate from each other. She disentangles the dress, crushes its softness against her cheek. Takes comfort in the black and white print; the lingering odour of sixties glamour. As a small girl, she had marvelled at her mother's body. The fluidity and peculiar curves held an innocence – the pale gleam of magnolia petals in spring. Beside the banister post she pauses. Each year as the months wore on, her pink mother bronzed. They used to sit on the riverbank fanning their faces languidly with one hand, cool as the English countryside in the height of summer.

The kitchen flagstones are cold. Last night's fire is dead. After that unspeakable encounter, she cannot eat breakfast with her father. Her flesh still tingles from shock. She switches on the radio. Opens windows to let in the morning chorus. The chill rush of dawn air is sweet with a meadow-flower scent; the sky is lightening to coral-pink.

Out she slips onto a path flanked by cow parsley and waist-high nettles. By the time Moses has stomped downstairs, switched off the radio, slammed the windows shut, she is scampering from the cottage like a crab from a breaking wave.

She presses her fingertips to her temples. Worry kept her awake all night. She is cloaked in wretchedness. She should have worn a coat. Everything is clenched.

She fast walks the circular route down the valley and up the hill, her ears deaf to the bull calf bellowing for his mother. Twenty minutes later she is panting up the garden path.

Bursting through the kitchen door, she yells, "Dad!"

Tobacco smoke wreathes its way through the low-ceilinged cottage. The study door is ajar. Her father is in a foul mood, collapsed in his armchair, reading the bible aloud with religious fervour. Her heart sinks. She creeps upstairs, flops onto her bed. Does she belong with this bitter, chaotic man? How her mother loved him goes beyond understanding.

When the grandfather clock strikes eleven, she grabs the car keys from their saucer and drives into town. The blue sky is painted with puffy clouds by the time she strolls to the farm to drop off the weekly groceries.

"I've got your shopping," Koliwe sings from the doorway.

Nutshells splinter under her sandals as she ducks beneath a basket of pansies dangling from a chain above the doorstep.

Len stands with his back to her; flies circle his balding head. The kitchen buzzes with blue-bottles; bunches of herbs and cornflowers hang drying from the ceiling.

"You alright?" Koliwe asks.

Len turns from packing his pipe. "Hello, little dove. I suppose so, yes."

She gives him her quizzical look. Frequently she finds herself captivated by what, as a child, seemed unexceptional, like the creases in Len's weathered cheeks, the weariness in his liquid brown eyes. An odd surge of affection for him surfaces.

"Joyce," Len calls, "Koliwe's here."

The farmer's wife, a reedy, straight-speaking woman emerging from the cool darkness of the pantry, is graced with little tenderness. She nods, then cocks her head of silvered grey hair at the crushed hazelnut shells. "Squirrels 'ave been busy," she says.

Involuntarily, Koliwe jolts from a movement within.

"What's the matter, your father's health?" Joyce takes up the grocery bag slumped in the doorway.

Koliwe stiffens with pride. "No, it's nothing." Saying goodbye, she shakes her head, but her throat thickens and aches.

Her slight shape turns, disappearing in a flash through the gates. It is the end of summer. Swallows dive-bomb from the farmhouse eaves, warning her, then swoop across the cobbled yard and out over rows of newly cut hay.

Koliwe takes the bridle path where bindweed flowers beside the river. If she squeezes the base of the white buds, drawn in for the close of day, they pop up and out. *Granny-pop-out-of-bed*, her mother used to say. She reaches a leafy hollow. Here, the river's sheen flickers muddy-bronze and mercury, marbling tree trunks with shimmering light. Koliwe's thoughts are leaves prancing on the breeze. Farm labour pays Andrew's rent. Can she be content with his condescending scent of over-ripe apples and matured sweat; brown hair flopping over his forehead? Can she love this man who gives her reassurance when she clasps her body to his, then lets go, her finger-marks dissolving like snow on warm skin? How to construct a different self? She scrambles up the bank. Leave home? When reaching the deep tractor ruts

leading to the cottage, shrill tones pierce the air. She dashes through the kitchen to the study. The phone stops ringing. The grandfather clock is struck dumb and wants winding.

Where is her father? His drinking seeps into everything.

Sunlight streaks the faded cloth of her father's armchair, a chest of drawers, six scarlet and turquoise Russian dolls, a jewellery box filled with childhood pleasures she once loved to idle through. Beneath the box is his sketchbook. His paintings adorn the walls – a warrior in leopard skins melting into blue-green flora; a woman's dark and delicate face wrapped in tortoiseshell cloth, the aunt she longs to meet – conjure a dream-like quality. Etchings on a copper plate bring to life the relentless flow of the river. The feeling of turbulence. The rush and transparency. What seems important pales to insignificance in the chase of the river – the sparkle of black and white – the craft of the etcher, letting the light through. There is comfort in the familiarity, yet something is wrong. Her sight wanders to his sketch of a little girl peeping from beneath a floppy sunhat. Crosshatching creates shadow on the daisy-patterned frock. The veil of time lifts. He has caught the aloof expression she had as a child. By the mirror she pauses, peers into her restless eyes. Torn between opposing forces – her dark-skinned father. Her mother, white. Belonging to two worlds and yet to none.

"Dad?" she shouts. She climbs the rickety stairs, searches rooms silent and empty. How his swarthy face, lined and toughened with time, grimaces at even the briefest mention of Swaziland – the country he renounces as godforsaken and dangerous.

But she is curious about her ancestry. One day she had asked, "Could you take me?"

"You want too much," he had snapped, wrinkling his brow.

Hating the father she loves comes as a shock. Neither understands the other. The daily clashes are agony. Both are imprisoned in separate cages of pain. Deaf to what the other

says. Paralysed by emotional wounds. Blind to new ways of behaving.

She scuffles downstairs, wreathed in the fusty smell of whisky and oils on canvas. Tell-tale signs clutter the circular rosewood table: another empty bottle, an ashtray overflowing with cigarette ends. She stumbles across the bible left open on the carpet. Leviticus 18:6-19: *None of you shall approach any blood relative of his to uncover nakedness; I am the LORD.* The sun's sharp perfection creeps across the contours of her anxious face. Where is her father this time?

Outside, on the overgrown path, she shivers with fury and love. Uncertainty hangs in the air, mingling with a sense of loss. She trips over tractor ruts. Startled sheep scatter. Rain freckles her forehead as she sprints towards the bridle path far below, hemming the river – a rumpled, reflective sheet, flowing beneath the bridge's arches. Halfway down the hillside, the view across the valley opens out. Deep in the English countryside, the changes that come with time have stopped. The scene has the faded look of a Constable painting, still and misted. There are the tall chimneystacks of the grey slate farmhouse, the tumble-down barn, furrows where the manor once stood, hedgerows enfolding twists of road. She runs past the creamy-white cow, swishing its tail around a sucking calf, along the wooded path and towards the thick, green river.

She stares in disbelief at the figure balanced on the high wall of the road bridge. His arms raised to shoulder height; hands outstretched. Given the amount he usually drinks, how has he achieved such a feat, climbed that high? He edges across mossy stones. He cannot swim. Her heart is a clasped fist. Does he realise what he is doing? The pendulum of time stops swinging. Moses' body, a T shape, shifts to the highest arch above the river. His drunken legs buckle. The bridge is a heartbeat away.

She screams and like a stone dropped from a wall Moses falls all the way down, to the river.

She is bounding between trees in short bursts of explosive speed. Down the grassy slope, between tall bulrushes dappled with sunlight, dashed with shade. Down the bank through thick and silent air. She reaches the pebbly strip of beach, scans the murky depths where the bridge's middle arch slices the water's flowing skin. Here the river is broader, deeper. Where is the splashing, the gasping, the thrashing? Where *is* he?

She slips sandals from her feet, wades into the icy flow. Ducks dart skyward in a quacking whir of wings. The mottled riverbed glistens crimson and mustard-yellow through disturbed silt. Her stomach tightens; red waves of emotion build. Time is passing. She wades until waist deep, thrusts forwards from the bank with as much force as she can, launching into an extended glide then panicked breaststroke. Swirling water buffets her chin. Foam circles twirl across the river's thick green face, coagulating in the middle, swelling downriver into a turbulent white gush. There is an ominous absence of light where Moses' body bobs beneath the bridge's shadow. Koliwe's arms are sculling. Her feet flutter to tread water, stirring memories of his final painting. The artist submerged in the river, professing his own death. The most troubled face she has ever seen.

Screened by spear-like reeds, his forehead surfaces, the skin varnished with water. She swims against the current. Chin angled upwards, his body rises, eyes drained of life. She reaches out; her fingers brush his chest. The chain of his silver crucifix hooks around her wrist and snaps. She reaches out again. The whale-like mass is too heavy. Already the current's force drags her deeper, will pull her to the depths. There is the thump-thud-thud of her pulse in her ears, the gurgling, gulping river, a giddy sickness of guilt and grief.

She scours the river's course to the curve downstream, one fist clutching her father's broken silver chain. Close by, his striped shirt balloons, then deflates and recedes from sight. As his face rises one last time, she reaches for his collar, grabs at

his nose. Her heart flutters with determination. But the sodden mass sinks. As swiftly as he appeared, water washes back over. Unbearably, he vanishes. He is gone.