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The Grieving Mothers of the Departed Children

and

How Does Trauma Manifest Non-Fictional and Fictional Cults?:
Exploring *The Girls*, *Foxlowe*, *After Me Comes The Flood*, and *The
Grieving Mothers of the Departed Children*

by

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Abstract

This thesis comprises a creative component in the form of a full-length novel, *The Grieving Mothers of the Departed Children*, and a critical component, 'How Does Trauma Manifest Non-Fictional and Fictional Cults?: Exploring *The Girls*, *Foxlowe*, *After Me Comes The Flood*, and *The Grieving Mothers of the Departed Children*.' The critical study begins with an exploration of trauma theory, and then moves on to consider contemporary examples of fictionalised cults through Emma Cline's *The Girls* (based on 'The Manson Family'), Eleanor Wasserberg's *Foxlowe*, Sarah Perry's *After Me Comes The Flood*, and the candidate's own novel *The Grieving Mothers of the Departed Children*. The non-fictional cult, 'The Manson Family', is explored in conjunction with *The Girls*, demonstrating how there is a porous border between the fictional and non-fictional status of cult doctrines that are based around trauma (and a promise to cure the trauma). In the sections regarding *Foxlowe* and *After Me Comes The Flood* the critical component investigates the effects of trauma and the ways trauma both forms and facilitates cults and the tendency towards cult-like philosophies. The candidate's novel *The Grieving Mothers*, follows the protagonist, Eternity, who after waking up in a river with amnesia, tries to adapt to life in a cult of bereaved mothers. Following a narrative that centres on trauma-induced memory loss and amnesia the novel aims to portray the way in which trauma is a vital element in the flourishing of cults, complementing the other literary pieces discussed in this thesis.

To my Husband

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THE GRIEVING MOTHERS OF THE DEPARTED CHILDREN

CHAPTER 1

There was nothing but a green blur. Then a blinding yellow light somewhere in the distance. Glistening bubbles ascended towards the light, wavering to and fro, unsure of whether to boast their pure beauty or disappear into the bright yellow void. Angling in toward one another, some yielded to the irresistible force of the river, transforming into simple things; a half sucked sweet, a broken pebble, the letter c. All these simple things were fragile against the gentle force of nature, and through the silence they merged into one, forming a single perfectly round bubble. Then it burst, leaving nothing in its absence but a still and off-white mist. From behind the haze millions of bubbles plunged, swimming outwards into the depths of the river, carrying with them the comforting voice of a woman; ‘Ety don’t stare straight at the sun, you’ll burn your eyes right out.’

The young girl’s eyelid’s fluttered like the wings of a drowning bee. “Ety I told you don’t stare straight at the sun,” said a voice once more. *Ety?* she thought. *Was it short for Ethel? Or Etta?* She didn’t like the resonance of either name, which made her sound like she had been born an old lady. She decided on Eternity. Everyone wants to live forever after all. Eternity was to be her name from this point on. She was lying face up on the surface of the water, her brown hair spread out around her. A baggy brown coat which barely covered her cold skin was heavy against her body, its fake gold buttons shining like precious seashells. One of her arms had broken free from the coat, bent at the elbow it looked paler than the fingertips piercing the river, on which a blood-red dragonfly sat cherishing the gentle breeze. Opening one eye, Eternity looked up. All the colours blended into one and then dispersed before her eyes. She couldn’t see the outline of the things she was staring at; they were merely a coloured blur. Then she saw the same blinding yellow light and heard the comforting, silvery voice of the woman: ‘Ety, I told you, don’t stare straight at the sun, you will burn your eyes right out.’ Noticing the red

blotch on her finger, she stared at it intently hoping that her eyes would clear themselves from the thick misty substance that was blocking her vision.

Then suddenly the world revealed its beauty and her eyes absorbed it piece by piece; a droopy leafy branch of a grand tree, the indistinct circle of the sun and a pair of blue eyes partially concealed by a piece of wrinkled flab, staring down at her.

‘Are you OK, dear? Dear? Are you OK?’

She gazed up to find that the blue eyes belonged to an elderly lady with puffy cheeks.

‘Breathe, love. Take deep breaths. Or you’ll pass out, dear. That’s what’ll happen if you don’t breathe.’

Trying to comprehend the words leaving the barely-there lips beneath the small blue eyes, she realised that a lump had gathered at the bottom of her throat. Not a single puff of air left her nostrils or her mouth, and she felt a throbbing pain on either side of her head, as if the pressure of oxygen building up inside of her was slowly enlarging her skull. All of a sudden the lump disappeared and was replaced with a rhythmic series of loud but short coughs. She felt the air entering her body and water escaping through her mouth with every cough, some falling into the river forming tiny dents which vanished almost instantaneously. Abruptly, she stopped coughing, as if she was the one who had commanded the coughs to arise, and now she had summoned them to stop. She blinked up at the two blue eyes that were still staring down at her.

‘Oh my. Deary me. Are you OK? Are you breathing now?’

Eternity managed a small nod. She opened her eyes as wide as she could and stared into the face of the old woman, counting three deep-set lines above her right eye and three on the left, until the same blur concealed her vision once more. She blinked the blur away and counted three brown beauty spots in the centre of her chin. She had countless wrinkles thrashed across her plump face and despite her obvious attempt at trying to cover them up with a thick layer of makeup, she had not been successful.

Eternity felt a tickle in the small of her back and instinctively plunged her hand into the water to drive away the culprit. The force of her arm dashing into the water threw several gushes into her face. Only then was she able to partially understand where she was. She looked around and saw that her right arm was suspended close to the top of the water, the tip of her index finger breaking through. She gazed down and saw the front of her black boot poking out of the large mass of water that she was lying in. There were tall trees all around her and the sun was no longer as radiant as it had been when she had laid eyes on it not too long ago. Had she come

down here to swim? When had she done this? She could not recall. She pushed down her legs, spending the last bit of energy she had left in her. The toes of her left leg dug into the gooey layer of mud, while her right leg which wore a heavy boot got trapped between a cluster of rocks. She didn't try to free it, but enjoyed the floatiness that came over her, followed by a lightness as a few pebbles fell out of her coat's pockets one after another.

The elderly lady let out a stifled gasp whose cause was incomprehensible to Eternity. She stared at the woman's parted lips. They quivered, as if she wanted to say something but was unable to create a coherent sentence. Eternity watched as the thick lump of saliva that had formed in the elderly lady's throat forced itself down.

'Dear? Would you like me to take you... home? I can do that for you if you want.'

'Home?' asked Eternity, her lips barely moving. Her eyes sprung open in surprise as if she couldn't believe that it was her own voice she was hearing.

'I know where you live... dear. Let me take you home.'

Eternity slid her leg out of the boot with ease, floated over towards the edge of the river and pushed herself out onto the grass. She ignored the elderly lady and observed her surroundings. She spotted a white butterfly floating in the wind, a purple towel drenched in what looked like lumpy porridge hanging on the branch of a tree, and a pair of red flat shoes placed neatly at the edge of the riverbed. She put her hand in the pocket of her coat and pulled out a small grey pebble, which resembled the moon. She didn't know why there were so many pebbles filling the pockets of her coat which, she noticed, was big enough to fit three more people of her own frame combined. She smiled as she looked down at the pebble in her hand and realised how beautiful it was, each crater deep and dark.

She turned to the old lady and said: 'Take me away. I'm cold.'

Then she stood up, woozy and frail, trying to remember how she had come to find herself floating on the surface of a river. But all she could make sense of was what she could see and feel at that exact moment. The sun was setting, its last rays piercing through the branches of the trees, stabbing at her eyes. She heard the voice again; 'Ety, don't stare at the sun.' And then realized that her throat was dry and hurt every time she allowed the air to enter her mouth. She pointed at her throat and distorted her face with pain.

'Does it hurt dear? You're thirsty I think. Home is not too far from here.'

She slid her feet into the red shoes which fit perfectly and turned back to look at the spot in the river where she had been lying a few minutes ago. The water absorbed the sky's pale tint

of orange, concealing the few pebbles and rocks which had fallen out of her pockets. The visual proof that she had actually been there was eliminated.

She couldn't remember anything. She leaned against the wide, uneven bark of a tree, its mossy roots extending out of the damp soil, flowing into the cold river. Pressing her palms into the deep curves of her eyes she strained her memory. Why had she been swimming in the river?

She dipped her hands into her pockets with the hope that she could protect her pruned hands from the wind.

'Dear? Are we going? I think we should set off before it gets too dark.'

Eternity took a step towards the woman and stopped abruptly as she felt something digging into her foot through her shoe's sole. She looked down, but couldn't quite make out what it was, as the sun no longer illuminated the world as it had done. She bent down to take a closer look. It was the cratered pebble that she had been admiring earlier on. When had she dropped it?

'I'm coming.' She walked further ahead and extended her right hand, waiting for the old lady to grasp it. It wasn't long before she felt the long supple fingers wrap around her own.

'I think you need a hot bath dear. You're as cold as a frozen chicken.'

Eternity nodded and they started walking towards the steep hill ahead of them.

'You know, dear, when I saw you in the river like that, I thought you was dead. You scared me, dear and it's not good for someone my age to be as scared as I was dear. It's no good for the heart you see.'

Eternity stared at the creased lips. She noticed that the lips weren't moving in accordance with what she was saying.

'You see dear, my husband became a victim of his heart. It killed him all in one go. He used to say that I was always in his heart. But, then I couldn't have been because his heart killed him. Not me. It's not nice... the fright you gave me dear... it's really not nice at all. It's utterly inconsiderate.'

Eternity couldn't take her eyes off the elderly lady's lips which were still moving much too fast for the words that she was speaking.

'But I don't remember anything,' said Eternity.

The woman let go of Eternity's hand and rubbed her palms against her thighs.

'You don't remember a thing? Nothing at all? Not even one thing?'

‘No. It’s all gone. There’s nothing here,’ said Eternity, tapping her middle finger against her forehead.

‘It’ll all come back to you. You’ll start remembering soon. Shock does this sometimes. Anyway...let’s keep our energy. We still have to climb that hill and I’m old, I don’t have as much energy as someone your age. I don’t want to come rolling down half way up.’

Eternity noticed that her mouth movements had finally caught up with the words she was uttering. She felt disregarded, as if it didn’t matter whether her memory was intact or not. As though all she needed to do was keep quiet and follow.

‘Do you know how many bodies are lying at the bottom of that river?’

‘No.’

‘I’ll tell you. A lot. Too much for anyone to count.’

‘What are they doing down there?’

‘They’re just dead.’

Eternity thought about death and realised that she couldn’t remember what happened after one died.

‘What happens after death?’

‘Nobody knows, my dear. But just imagine it like inhaling the darkness until you are all consumed.’

They had finally reached the foot of the hill, an incessant rustle echoing from between them into the silence of the night, as their jackets rubbed against each other with every step they took.

‘My husband used to say that we don’t have long on this earth. That one day we will all drown...even the dead. He used to say that we were our own biggest enemies, that we could blame only ourselves and no one else for our extinction. He was an agnostic atheist, my husband was. Never believed in Gods. He never believed in anything he couldn’t see. He claimed that giant waves would bury us one day. Waves triple the size of these trees. And the creators of these waves would be nobody but us.’

The elderly lady looked up at the moon. Its forceful light must have hurt her eyes, because she squinted and then looked down immediately.

‘I know someone who had a baby. You should have seen him. You would have said that it was a baby monkey. Its long thin tail bulging from his spine. A real human baby. That’s what we humans done. Created babies with tails.’

Eternity tried to say something in response but couldn’t.

The elderly lady craned her neck to look at Eternity. ‘Hypothermia,’ she said.

CHAPTER 2

‘This is home,’ said the elderly lady, extending her arm out towards a grand house on a quiet street with several houses aligned one next to the other. The journey had been arduous, with only a few mishaps, as the old woman had rolled down the hill a few times, but she had managed to pick herself up every time without ending up at the very bottom.

‘This one?’ asked Eternity, pointing to the house with a large metal plaque hanging over its pink door. The plaque consisted of half a heart, with a narrow ‘X’ drawn on the side where the other half of the heart should have been.

She didn’t recall ever having lived here before. The window at the far right was broken and had been replaced with a cardboard box. She could see a washing line standing in the back lawn of the house next door, the clothes swaying to and fro.

‘You’ve got friends living with you too. But they’re out now. They’ll be back around noon tomorrow.’

Eternity had not questioned the elderly lady about how she had known the location of where she lived, mainly because she was numbed by exhaustion. She also thought that she may have been someone living nearby who had recognised her. But now she was taken aback. How did she know the exact time of when her housemates would return?

‘How do you know they’ll be back by noon tomorrow?’

‘I know everything, my deary.’

The elderly lady’s answer did not satisfy Eternity, but it had to do for now. She could feel the cold burning at her toes, causing her already dry throat to hurt even more.

‘I’m cold. I want somewhere warm please,’ said Eternity, ‘Can we go in now?’

They walked up the last step onto the leaf-filled balcony. Eternity was occupied with looking around at the weathered rocking chair in the far right corner of the balcony. The flaky blue paint was sparsely present on the chair, with a single rusty nail poking through the centre of the seat. She could hear the elderly lady rummaging through her pockets, crinkling and jingle jangling the only audible noises amongst the silence. After what seemed like several minutes the elderly lady pulled out a gold key from her pocket and pushed it into the key hole. It fit perfectly and

opened the door without any resistance. Eternity felt a surge of heat seeping from the crown of her head to the tips of her toes.

‘You’ve....’ Eternity pointed at the open door. ‘Opened my door.’

‘Yes dear,’ said the elderly lady, strolling into the dark house.

Eternity didn’t move, but stood in the doorway staring into the house that was supposedly her own. Was it safe for her to go in? And how could she be sure that this was her home, when the door had been opened by somebody she had no recollection of? She didn’t have much choice though. With a non-existent memory she didn’t know where else she’d go. She took two steps in and decided that she would not close the door behind her, in case she needed to run out.

As soon as she walked in, to the left of the door Eternity noticed nine pairs of red shoes, all similarly shiny with the heels ineptly painted into red with felt-tip. She tried to think of why she, or the few housemates that she had, would need nine pairs of shoes each almost identical to the other.

Opposite the doorway was a room that seemed to be the kitchen. The light in the room was on, which made Eternity think that this was the room that the elderly lady had walked into, but she couldn’t hear any noise apart from the occasional dripping of water from the tap. She walked in and saw that there was a stack of white plates piled neatly on top of one another in the sink, the top five plates were slanted towards the stove which was partially hidden under yet more cups and bowls, and forks and knives, and a few baby bottles. All the dishes were dripping with a thick dark brown sauce.

A strong familiar smell awakened her senses. An intense aroma of spice hit her nose—a mixture of cumin and cinnamon. She couldn’t remember anything but these scents awakened a sense of memory in her. They were ones she felt she may have inhaled before. She followed the smell to the saucepan on the stove. She opened the lid and breathed in the wonderful accumulation of aromas. It was an infusion of sweet, bitter and sour. The saucepan was still slightly warm, and a thin mist of steam rose up towards her face from what seemed like small pieces of boneless meat, marinated in some kind of dark brown sauce with pieces of herb stuck onto the meat resembling tiny beauty spots. Eternity felt a faint movement in the depths of her stomach, which was followed by a long rumble. She picked up the closest fork she could find and plunged it into the meat, tearing out a big piece. The meat was tender and dispersed inside her mouth instantaneously. She felt the sauce slide down her throat, smoothening its dryness.

After she had chewed the last piece of meat which was enough to suppress her hunger, she turned on her spot looking around for the old woman. She stood in front of the stove and listened for any possible sounds that could come from within the house. It was almost completely silent, apart from the water that continued to drip from the kitchen sink. She observed the kitchen, and identified a second door, made of metal, which was locked from inside, the key still in the keyhole.

The kitchen door started to squeak as the wind, flowing in through the front door, blew onto it causing it to sway on its hinges. An unsettling feeling began to gather inside her, as she started to fully realise that she was in a house that she wasn't sure was her own.

She walked back into the hallway and noticed that there was another room on the right of the main door. It was partially concealed behind a white bookcase filled with all sorts of books. She read a few of the titles that caught her eye. *The Science of Surviving the Death of a Child. Who are The Grieving Mothers of the Departed Children? Forgiving Yourself After the Death of a Child.* She remembered what the elderly lady had told her about death, that it came as a result of inhaling the darkness until one was completely consumed.

Standing in front of the closed door of the room behind the bookcase, she held tightly onto its silver handle. She tried to imagine what could be on the other side of the door. Another human perhaps. A housemate.

The door handle was cold amongst her sweaty palms. She knelt down and tried to look through the keyhole, thinking about what she would do if she saw someone inside. Would she run out the main door as far away as she could? Or would she open the door and introduce herself? Maybe the person inside already knew who she was. To her surprise she noticed that something had been stuffed into the keyhole, preventing her from getting a glimpse of the inside. She pushed her pinky finger into the keyhole, the sharp metal grating against her skin, as the crinkling something fell out of the keyhole into the room on the other side of the door. A drop of blood trickled from her finger down to her elbow. Through the keyhole the room was darkish, perhaps dimly illuminated with a candle. There was no one in sight. Without standing up she pulled down on the door handle and crawled in.

The room was lit with a large red candle sitting on a wooden stool. She stood up and looked all around her at the intensity of red within the room. Everything including the walls and ground was a shade of red. Even the lined papers scattered all over the ground and piled half way up the wall in the left corner were red, as was the beaded fishing net which was

scrunched up in the centre of the room. She picked up one of the papers that seemed to have fallen from the pile. On it was written a single sentence: *We have avenged the death of our children.*

The same heat that had escalated within her body when she had watched the elderly lady open the door wrapped her once again. She dropped the paper and took a few steps backwards, bumping into the door, which hit into an unsteady object behind it. The clang of metal rang in the room. She heard the object tip one way then the other as it tried to steady itself, the clanging gradually fading away.

She pushed the door to see what it was that she had hit into. She felt sick by the image she laid eyes, the tangy taste of the meat she had eaten slid up in her throat and then slid back down again. The big blue eyes of the dolls that hung upside down from the metal rail behind the door stared at her; nametags hung around their necks concealing their mouths.

CHAPTER 3

Eternity rushed out of the room and slammed the door behind her. She rested her back on the narrow strip of wall between the bookcase and the room, slumped to the floor, and wrapped her hands around her knees. The air inside of her body was knotted at her throat again, and she felt the same pressure in her skull as she had felt when she was unable to breathe in the river. She opened her mouth and attempted to draw air into her body. After a few inhalations she felt the knot unravel and finally air filled her lungs again.

It wasn't long before Eternity heard footsteps running across the upper floor of the house. Abruptly they stopped and then continued down the stairs. Eternity didn't have the energy to dart out of the open door as she had planned to do if she felt danger. She sat on the floor unmoving, her chin rested on her knees. She was sure that the footsteps had made themselves all the way down the stairs, and she was almost certain that whomever the footsteps belonged to was now standing very close to her. After sitting in total silence for what seemed like a long time to her, Eternity extended her head across the bookcase and looked towards the stairs. She was relieved when she saw that it was the elderly lady, who was holding tightly onto the wooden knob of the banister, gazing around the house.

'I'm here,' said Eternity, grabbing onto a shelf of the bookcase to lift herself up.

The old woman climbed down the last stair and pressed her hand onto her heart.

'Are you crazy, dear? What are you doing there, hiding away like that? I thought you'd left when I saw the door open.'

'I didn't mean to scare you,' said Eternity.

The elderly lady slid her feet against the tiled floor, her hand still firmly pressed against her heart. 'I mean. You nearly gave me a heart attack dear.'

'I'm sorry. But what are you doing here?'

'What do you mean dear? I live here too, my deary. You don't remember? We call here the House.'

Eternity didn't know if she could trust her.

'Why didn't you tell me before?' asked Eternity.

'Because I thought you knew, dear. Everyone knows where they live.'

'But I told you that I didn't remember anything.'

‘I just thought you were joking, my dear.’

‘It’s no joke,’ said Eternity, ‘I honestly don’t remember anything. What’s my name?’

‘Well, of course, it’s Ethan, my dear. But you said that you didn’t like being called a man’s name, so we call you Ety for short.’

The elderly lady bent over and pushed her slipper towards her foot. Eternity thought of the voice that she had heard previously down at the river. The voice had continuously referred to her as ‘Ety’. So, Ety was short for Ethan.

‘Just call me Eternity from now on.’

‘You can’t change your name overnight, dear. We’ll call you Ety as we’ve always done, and you can say that it’s short for Eternity.’

‘What’s your name?’ asked Eternity, watching the elderly lady shut the front door.

‘I’m Lettaya, my dear.’

‘There was something... in that room.’ Eternity pointed at the door.

‘Oh, those dear. You don’t know what they are? They’re just...’

‘I don’t remember,’ said Eternity.

‘...the dolls of the girls that live in this house. They use them for the Remembrance Ceremony once a week.’

‘What’s that?’

‘They remember their dead children, my dear.’

‘There were a lot of dolls in there.’

‘Yes, my deary. We’re a lot of people here.’

Eternity was tired of asking questions. She felt like she was pulling the information out of Lettaya’s mouth by force. Bit by bit.

‘It’s past my bed time, my love. I’m old. I need to be in bed now.’

‘Ok,’ said Eternity, thinking about whether she should ask Lettaya where her bedroom was, but before she could, Lettaya had already turned around and started climbing the stairs.

Eternity did not feel safe inside the house with Lettaya, so she opened the door and wandered onto the balcony. The sun was slowly revealing itself behind the tall shabby trees across the road, amongst which they had dallied through not too long ago.

Eternity sat on the rocking chair, its chipped paint stabbing behind her knees, the dampness of her coat being absorbed into her bare arms. She realized how pretty the metal rail surrounding the balcony was, painted in reds, greens and yellows. She was observing its several patterns when a fluorescent pinkness caught her eyes in the expansive lawn beyond the terrace. She squinted to focus on whatever was standing a few metres in front of her. It was a young girl holding a severely oxidized bronze pan, the top of a knotted white plastic bag emerged from within the pan and shook in the tender breeze. The girl had a swarthy complexion, with perfectly smooth skin. She was wearing a matching pair of stripy bright pink pyjamas. She stood statue-still on the pavement, as if she was a pin holding the earth together and her single movement could cause the world to collapse.

‘Hello there,’ said Eternity. ‘Are you looking for something?’

The young girl didn’t respond, but just stared at Eternity.

Eternity stood up and walked past the girl, not daring to take her eyes off her. She noticed that the girl had not blinked since she had appeared. She made her way up to the gates and looked down the road. There was no one around.

Eternity spun her head around to look at the young girl again. In the exact spot the girl had been standing was now a well-fed glistening teal beetle. She gazed down the road again, and then looked back at the beetle who was situated a few centimetres behind from where it had been, despite the rapid movement of its sticky legs, spinning forward, quivering with exhaustion. She scrunched her face up as she realized that one of its black stick-like leg, had been caught up in between the grass-infested patio tiles. She watched as it slowly detached itself from the beetle’s body, while the beetle calmly walked off, as if it wasn’t his leg that had been severed. She walked on the bricked pathway, that led from the gate to the steps, and onto the balcony. Then let herself fall into the rocking chair and looked up to the area where she expected to see the beetle. To her surprise she saw that the girl in the pink pyjamas was once more standing in the same spot she had been standing before being replaced by the beetle.

The young girl was still not blinking, but was holding onto the pan, her nails a yellowish shade of white. Finally, feeling distressed by the girl’s presence Eternity strode into the house and shut the door.

There was a pink plastic bag on the shoes in the hallway. She was certain that it hadn’t been there the previous night. She picked it up and undid the knot. An acrid scent hit her in the face. She had never smelt anything so vile before. She cautiously looked into the bag and

spotted a pile of small brownish pieces all of different sizes. Some were blemished with blood that had rubbed itself onto the other pieces which were covered in fur.

‘Lettaya. Lettaya,’ she called. When nobody responded, she assumed that the elderly lady was still fast asleep, but it wasn’t long before Lettaya came dawdling out of the kitchen holding a big knife dripping with the same watery substance that was smothered all over the pieces in the bag.

‘Did you call me dear?’

‘Yes. What are these in here? They smell horrible.’

‘Oh, nothing dear. Just cutting up a rabbit, for the ceremony tonight. The girls will be back soon.’

‘What ceremony?’ asked Eternity. She couldn’t believe that the pieces in the bag once belonged to a living rabbit.

‘You know what ceremony, dear. The Donation Ceremony,’ said Lettaya, wiping the knife on her bloody apron. ‘You know what it is dear. When every evening one member of the house goes off down to the river and pours in the cooked rabbit meat as a source of food for their deceased children, dear,’ she continued condescendingly, noticing the stupefied expression on Eternity’s face. ‘They need to eat too, you know.’

‘They do I guess,’ said Eternity, watching red drops of blood dripping from the knife onto the floor. ‘Are all my housemates’ children dead?’

‘Yes, Ety,’ Lettaya said firmly. ‘Every goddamn single one of us apart from you has lost a child. That’s why we’re called The Grieving Mothers of the Departed Children.’

Eternity didn’t understand why she was living with them if she herself had not lost. She repeated the name that the people of the house called themselves. The Grieving Mothers of the Departed Children. Why would a few people living together feel the necessity to give themselves a collective title?

‘If I don’t have a deceased child, why am I here?’ asked Eternity.

Lettaya sighed. ‘Your memory should have come back to you by now. You’re The Agent Between Life and Death, my dear. I can’t talk much now; the girls will be here shortly. I need to sort a few other things out before they come.’ Lettaya turned around and walked into the kitchen. Eternity wanted to wipe the puddle of blood on the floor, but unable to find anything to wipe it with around her, she entered the kitchen as well. Lettaya was not in the kitchen, and, as she had the previous night, Eternity again wondered where she kept disappearing to.

CHAPTER 4

Eternity sat on the sofa in the sitting room, the small hardback book that she had found in the only draw of the coffee-table, along with a severely-chewed-on pen and a dusty device with buttons which she had not touched, lying on her lap. Inside were bright coloured drawings, simple yet elegant, of people all smiling in bold black upward curves. Dispersed in between the drawings were large writing. **Girl**, read Eternity. **Boy**. **Mother**, she uttered, staring at the picture next to the word, a blonde stick lady with a triangular pink dress, holding the hand of a shorter person with wild brown hair and dark orange freckles. She realised that each word coincided with the image directly beside it, giving the reader a sense of what it represented, simplifying complex depictions into single words. Writing made everything real somehow, thought Eternity. Writing made things make sense. It was then that she decided to write her observations down, hoping that she would therefore be able to understand the happenings around her. She would document things that conjured in her an emotion, a scent that she remembered from before, a colour, the feel of a material maybe.

In the large margins of the book, around the drawing and writing, she wrote: ‘Things that I know are definitely real or things that I know of but don’t know how’ and underlined it. Then, she drew a horizontal zigzagged line underneath it and then drew two short zigzagged vertical lines on either side of the sentence that connected to the horizontal line, confining the sentence that would prove her sanity into a tiny box. Pressing the pen solidly onto the paper, she drew a circle and filled it in. The dot she had drawn was real.

She pressed her finger onto it and rubbed. It didn’t disappear. This is how she knew that the dot was real, along with the act of rubbing. Shaking the pen between her index and middle finger, Eternity recalled the smell of the aromatic food in the saucepan that was familiar to her yet failed to bring along an image that could match it. *Cinnamon and cumin*, she wrote. *I like cinnamon better. I know that I’ve smelt both before. Meat. Stopped Hunger, Will remember. I know feeling*, she wrote slowly, carefully drawing out each letter. *The shiver that comes with feeling cold. I know warmth, the way it brings back feeling to every part of the body. I’ve learnt of death. It’s inhaling the darkness until you are completely gone. I know danger, the need to run away the fastest you can from something you’re not sure of. I know that the colour of red*

is bad. That it's the colour of the devil. And... I know animals. The empty look in their eyes. Rabbit. Beetle.

She tucked the book along with the pen into her coat pocket and then faced the big glass door, from which she could see the upper floor of the house next door and the fence that separated the two houses. There was a small silver frame sitting on the coffee table next to the sofa. Three women stared back at her from the frame. They were all around the same age, fairly young, but none resembled the other. The woman at the far right of the frame had a chubby face, with freckles scattered all over her cheekbones and forehead. The one in the centre had a mono-brow, her hair parted perfectly in the centre and tied back. And the one furthest to the left was wearing eye-glasses with a thick red frame. They leant into each other, all wearing identical necklaces with a symbol of half a heart and the letter X. It was the same sign that she had seen hanging above the front door. Lettaya extended her head from the kitchen.

'I'm going to go get dressed. So, should you. That coat is really not that pleasant on you.' Eternity saw Lettaya glance over her with disgusted eyes.

'OK,' said Eternity absentmindedly. 'Who are they?' she asked, picking up the frame and turning it towards Lettaya.

Lettaya rolled her eyes. 'It'll all come back to you. It'll all comeback. That's Keira, Chiara, and Serena' she said, separating their names into syllables and pointing at each woman one by one. 'They'll be here soon. I'll bring down your clothes.'

Eternity watched Lettaya make her way into the hallway and up the stairs, her feet sliding against the tiled floor.

Eternity put the frame down on the table and gazed out the glass door. The girl with the pink pyjamas was standing outside again, her back leaning against the fence. She was no longer holding the pan, but had a cardboard sign hanging around her neck: **We have come to get you E.**

Eternity ran over to the glass door and attempted to close the curtain which did not budge. Slowly she saw that more children were emerging from the left and right of the road, surrounding the girl in the pink pyjamas. They assembled themselves into the shape of a triangle, behind the girl with the pink pyjamas, who was standing at the nearest point to the house. They were uniformly dressed in pink t-shirts. The calming voice that she had heard at the river, resonated in her ears once more.

'Ety don't look straight at the sun, you'll burn your eyes out.'

A thick grey cloud blurred her vision. She rubbed her eyes with her fingertips. When she opened them, the grey haze had disappeared, but the children were still standing. Their mouths moved in unison, but she could hear no sound. She was just about to leave the room, when Lettaya walked in, two red pieces of clothes hanging over her forearm.

‘Here are your clothes, my deary. Are you ok? You don’t look so well. You look pale. Did you catch a cold from last night? Come here.’

Lettaya pulled Eternity by the arm, touched the backside of her hand on her forehead before pressing her lips on the same spot. ‘Everything seems normal,’ she said. ‘I don’t feel no extreme heat.’

Should I tell her about the children outside? thought Eternity. Why would all these children just gather up in front of the house? Eternity looked outside once more. There was not a single child in sight.

‘You can see them, can’t you?’ asked Lettaya, unable to contain her excitement.

‘See who?’

‘The departed children.’

‘Where are the departed children?’ asked Eternity.

‘In the afterlife my deary.’

‘And I can see them?’

‘Yes dear. That’s why you’re given the title of The Agent Between Life and Death. Only you can see them.’

Eternity could feel a sharp pain building in her head, it started at the temples and dispersed itself around, like a tiny person inside of her was knocking on her skull. The pain in her head gradually intensified and she could feel her temples pulsing with pressure. She held onto the corner of the sofa, then when the pain became intolerable she pressed her palms on either side of her head.

‘Dear, are you OK?’

‘I better sit down a bit,’ said Eternity, and she slowly walked around the sofa and plopped herself down.

‘Come on now, wear your clothes, the girls will be here any minute.’

Suddenly, piercing the silence in the room was the sound of whistles and chanting. The noise was coming from a gathering just to the side of the house. They were repeating the letter E, loud enough for her to hear. She turned her gaze towards the glass door and to her surprise

there stood once again, the same group of children, assembled in the same neat triangle. As she was staring outside her vision blurred again, and the soothing voice came back to her: 'Ety, please don't stare at the sun.' The sound faded away.

CHAPTER 5

She must have passed out because when she opened her eyes she was laying down on the sofa, without a clue of what time it was. Eternity remembered that Lettaya had told her to get dressed as her housemates were going to be back soon. Was it soon yet? She opened her eyes and saw that her clothes were hanging over the back of the sofa. What seemed like a thick red cardigan was on the verge of sliding onto her lap. There was no noise, so she guessed that the girls had not arrived yet. She attempted to lift her head off the sofa, but it was as heavy as if it was filled with water. With the help of her arms, she pushed herself up. She looked out of the glass door. There was no one in sight. The children that had been chanting the first letter of her name had abandoned the neighbourhood. For all she knew she may have just dreamed them.

Eternity stood up and first took her trousers off. The elastic around the waist was still slightly damp. She replaced those with the dry red ones and cherished the moment when the dry clothes touched her body. She could almost feel the clothes absorbing her body heat and retaining it, a change from the dull chill that the damp clothes provided. Eternity removed her coat, dropped it on the floor and put on the red cardigan. She recalled that Lettaya had also been dressed in a similar attire. She walked out into the hallway and called out to Lettaya. There was no response, and she could hear no movement from either upstairs or downstairs. The front door was open, and she walked out onto the balcony. She gazed towards the house next door and saw that the clothes on the clothesline had been gathered, the pegs rotating rapidly from the force of the wind. She strolled towards the centre of the tiled pathway leading up to her house and looked up. All the windows were open but there was no one in sight. She walked further away towards the gate, terrified that she, in fact, had the choice of walking away and never coming back. There was no one around to stop her, but there were too many directions to take and she would probably writhe with indecision.

As she was deep in thought, she spotted movement to her right. From behind the yellow car parked in front of the house next door, she saw a girl sauntering towards her. Her ankle-long woolly cardigan flapped around behind her, highlighting her slender pale legs. She was closing her eyes now and then, swaying her head swiftly from side to side and moving her dark-purple lips, from which occasionally escaped a few sounds, some in the form of coherent words.

Her hand was pressed to her ear. Was she one of her housemates? Eternity waited for the girl to speak to her.

‘Babe?’ said the girl, putting the small rectangular device she was firmly holding to her ear into her cardigan pocket. ‘Where you been? I haven’t seen you in a good few weeks? Where did you disappear to girl? You got Denise and me dead worried. We thought we said something to offend you or something. Or that you were off on your random spiritual meditative holidays again.’

Eternity wanted to say hi and to ask her if she was one of her housemates, but the words knotted in her throat.

‘You’re back,’ said the girl, when Eternity did not say anything. ‘Tell me the truth were you on one of your spiritual crazes again?’

‘Erm... Yes well. But who on earth...? What is...?’ stuttered Eternity, trying to think of where exactly she’d come back from. ‘I was always here,’ she added, when she saw that the girl was placing the earphones back into her ears.

‘Oh no you wasn’t girl. If you were you’d have come to see us, I’d like to think. We need to catch up. But, don’t for a second think that I want to hear about all that spiritual bullshit. You know I don’t believe in it. We’ll talk about other stuff. Real stuff.’ She scrunched up her nose as if she’d had a sudden itch and rolling her eyes, she pulled down at her t-shirt. ‘I’m going for a coffee on the high-street...’ She swirled both index fingers in mid-air and pointed down the road. ‘Would you like to come along? Gonna be by myself. Denise can barely walk. She’s worse than you last saw her. Big as elephant, grumpy as a Persian cat. She laughed sardonically, drawing a baby bump in front of her stomach with her hands. Eternity let out an anxious laugh that escaped her body in the form of a gradually deflating wheeze. ‘So, you’re coming?’

‘No,’ said Eternity, dismissing the offer. ‘I’ve got to...erm... do stuff.’ She had agreed to be led along by a strange old lady she didn’t think she knew. She wasn’t going to let another stranger persuade her to go places she didn’t recognise.

‘Stuff? Talking is stuff. We can talk. Catch up. That’s stuff too.’

‘It’s urgent,’ said Eternity.

‘Oh wow. Look at you all grown up with all these urgent businesses and everything,’ said the girl, turning her face up towards the sun with closed eyes. ‘I’ll tell you what. We can meet tomorrow. I got nothing to do. And you probably won’t have any urgent things, then?’ She quotation marked the ‘urgent’ between curved fingers.

Eternity nodded.

‘Good, and whatever’s superglued your tongue to the bottom of your mouth, get rid of it. I can’t be doing all the talking tomorrow.’ She threw her arm behind Eternity, yanked her harshly towards herself, pressed her cheeks onto Eternity’s, first on one then the other, and kissed the air, creating a persistent ring in her ears.

‘So, The Bean...the one on the end of the high-street. Don’t like the other one. Shall we say at 8?’

Eternity nodded.

The girl strode away, shoulders rotating as if she was trying to loosen a trapped nerve.

‘Hey. How do you know me?’ shouted Eternity behind her.

The girl abruptly stopped and turned around to look at Eternity.

‘Shut up babe, seriously. I’m gonna start thinking you’re mental. I’m gonna start thinking you’re questioning our friendship’ said the girl.

‘I thought you lived here,’ said Eternity, pointing at the house.

‘Who lives here?’

‘Me.’

‘You?’

‘Yes.’

The girl threw her hair back and wrapped her cardigan tightly around herself. Eternity thought that she looked a bit nervous. She bowed her head and wiped her hands on the sides of her waist several times.

‘Why would you think that?’

‘I don’t think that. I do,’ said Eternity.

‘I don’t have time for mind games babes,’ said the girl. ‘If you’re gonna come tomorrow evening, come with a straight mind. I’m gonna be waiting.’

‘Hey,’ shouted Eternity behind her, when she saw that the girl was walking away. ‘I forgot to ask your name.’

The girl lifted her arm and flicked out a perfectly straight middle finger.

‘Hannah. And fuck you’, she shouted.

CHAPTER 6

Eternity strolled back towards the house, thinking of what had just happened. She'd been recognised, been told that she'd been missed, been shown affection and had a middle finger shown her way. She still couldn't believe that she'd been invited to 'catch up' tonight. She didn't know or remember who the girl was. Hannah, she'd said before she'd honoured her with a finger, but she couldn't recall a Hannah. She would take up the offer as a great opportunity to learn a bit about herself, especially since Lettaya was showing a strong resistance towards understanding her not remembering a single god damn thing. As she was about to enter the house she saw that a woman was sitting on the balcony's wooden floor.

'Hi,' said Eternity. 'You must be one of my housemates.'

The woman turned to face her. The bright pink lipstick smeared irregularly over her lips stood out as the prominent feature on her face. The jangling of the several bracelets encircling her arm on which her red woolly top was pulled up startled Eternity. The young woman tucked her hair behind her ears and stood up. Between her feet, Eternity noticed a pot filled with soil, a single dry twig making itself visible through the damp earth. A few clumps of soil fell from the woman's finger tips onto the balcony. As soon as the woman perceived the mess that she had made, she diverted her gaze down, placed her palm across her chest and started apologising.

'I'm sorry my Holy One. I'm so sorry. It wasn't intentional, especially not in front of you my Holy One. I'm so sorry if I've caused offence.'

Eternity could see that the woman had wiped the damp soil on her fingers all over the front of her top. She kept repeating her apologies.

'It's OK,' said Eternity. When Eternity realized that the woman was not going to stop apologising any time soon, she ambled over to her and pulled her arm away from her chest.

The woman stopped speaking and stared into Eternity's face, widening and narrowing her eyes as if trying to adjust their focus.

'My Holy One, I've never seen you from this close before.' She placed her palms on either side of Eternity's face and inhaled. Eternity felt the tiny hairs on her face vibrate.

'OK. OK. I'm not Holy in any way,' said Eternity, taking a step back from the woman.

‘They always said you were humble my Holy One. But you are holy. You probably don’t know who I am, I’m Betty. Short for Elizabeth.’ She extended her head towards Eternity and planted a kiss on her cheek.

Eternity must have gradually walked backwards without realizing because her back hit into the door. The woman’s face was no further away than it had been when they had been standing in the centre of the balcony. Eternity grabbed the knob of the door to support herself from toppling over, as her feet were numbed by the intense fear of unwelcomed attention.

‘My Holy One. You’re up here and we’re down here,’ she said, elevating one hand and lowering the other.

The woman stepped away. She was smiling, her lips stretched from one side of the lower half of her face to the other. Eternity saw that her two front teeth were missing, and through the gap she caught a glimpse of her puffy yellow tongue.

‘My Holy One. I know you’re very busy and know that you don’t have the time to meet everyone in person. You speak to people when you see their children my Holy One and now you speak to me. Have you seen my baby? My Eugene? I would be so grateful if you have.’

Eternity looked up at the woman who was removing the bracelets from her left arm one by one and sliding them onto her right.

‘I don’t know,’ said Eternity. ‘I don’t remember what happened before the...’ Eternity thought back to her presence in the river the previous evening, but she did not want to say anything about it until she could make sense of it herself, ‘before yesterday. Everything in here is all gone.’ She patted her forehead.

Betty placed the bracelet she was holding on the tip of her index finger and spun it around. She stared at Eternity without saying anything, until the bracelet flipped off her finger and rolled off the balcony onto the lawn. She did not attempt to pick it up but turned back to Eternity.

‘I don’t remember,’ repeated Eternity again. ‘Nobody seems to understand. I just don’t remember anything. There’s nothing in here.’

When Betty did not respond Eternity stamped her feet on the wooden balcony which caused the rocking chair to gently sway backwards and forwards.

‘Speak to me Betty. Please speak to me. Tell me something. Anything.’

Betty scratched in between her eyebrows, leaving two faint pink marks, and firmly bit down on the flaky skin of her lips. Blood oozed from a single spot in the centre of her lips.

‘You’re bleeding. Right here,’ said Eternity, prodding at the same spot on her own lip where Betty was bleeding.

Not bothering to look up, Betty wiped her lip with the arm of her woolly top. She then tugged at the sleeve of her top and pressed it down on her lip.

‘You see the dead my Holy One. You see our dead children.’ Betty’s face dropped immediately. All her features, including her eyes drooped down, as if her face had suddenly given up on gravity.

‘I think something bad... or if not bad... at least something happened to me yesterday. This something also affected my memory. I woke up in a river and I just don’t remember how I got there or what I was doing there in the first place. I only remember the things that happened afterwards and even then, I don’t know if what I’m remembering is real.’

‘We sent you down there, my Holy One. Yesterday. You remember... to speak to Serena’s son. When he went missing people told her that he was last seen down at the river. That he had been sitting by the river and throwing stones and sticks into the water. And then he never came back home. We thought you could find him there. You went and didn’t come back for ages.’

Eternity was confused. She had been sent down to the river to find Serena’s son? She couldn’t remember who Serena was and she also couldn’t remember her walk from here down to the river.

Betty picked up Eternity’s hand and placed it between her two palms.

‘You really don’t remember my Holy One. You must not tell anyone for now. It will all come back to you sooner than later I’m sure.’

Betty’s pupils glistened like dying stars.

‘Would you like me to show you the graves of our children my Holy One? They don’t all contain bodies, as some of us don’t have access to the bodies. But, some do. Mine doesn’t.’

‘What happened to your child’s body?’ asked Eternity, immediately regretting asking the question. She didn’t want to upset the only person in the house whom she had managed to form a two-way communication with. ‘You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to,’ she said closely after.

‘No, my Holy One. It’s OK. She burned in a house fire and there was nothing left apart from the teeth, which are here.’

Betty pulled out a necklace from under her top, which had three teeth hanging on a thin red thread. They were tiny, and mostly perfectly white, apart from the few black dots here and there.

‘Oh... They’re so small.’ sighed Eternity, unable to think of anything else to say.

‘She was only four my Holy One.’ Betty tucked the necklace back under her top. ‘Shall we go now?’

Eternity nodded.

Eternity followed Betty down the steps, towards the side of the house and then along a thin tiled path aligned with roses on either side. The path led them to a colossal shed at the far right corner of the lawn, made with a nylon sheet and some metal poles. Eternity guessed that the nylon must have been transparent at one point, but now the inside could barely be seen, as a thick layer of dust had gathered on the outside.

When they entered Eternity felt her eyes steam up from the humidity within the shed. There were rows and rows of tomato plants, and in front of each was placed a slab of stone with an engraved name and date. Eternity read some of them aloud.

Nicole

8/09/1997-7/10/2000

My beautiful baby taken away from me so soon. May your soul be at peace.

Harrison (9/09/2004)

You were not even given a chance to see this world baby. May the other world bring you happiness.

‘Are these the graves?’ asked Eternity, picking off a ripened tomato.

Betty who was rummaging in an old rusty washing machine which had been seemingly transformed into a tool shed, turned to face Eternity. As Eternity was about to bite into the tomato, she leapt forwards and hit it out of her hand. The tomato fell in front of Eternity and splattered all over the floor, a few seeds slid down her shoes.

‘What did you do that for?’ rasped Eternity.

Betty hit her chest with her fist in anger. A hollow sound resonated from inside her.

‘OK,’ started Betty, taking a rapid succession of deep breaths to calm herself down. Her long side-fringe flew up and settled back down as she inhaled and exhaled. ‘Firstly, all of these are for our children,’ she glided her palms over the tomato bush beside her. ‘The tomatoes, the cucumbers. That’s what our children feed on from their graves. They’re not for us. We are all givers here, we don’t take. *Thy should always give to the next generation, especially the next generation in the world beyond.* Come with me. If you see maybe you will remember.’

They exited the shed through a door to the side that was made of odd pieces of wood, hay, branches and dried leaves all hammered together. On the other side of the door was a muddy area with empty sacks scattered about. Eternity spotted a yellow ball underneath a garden fork that was sitting up against the mud-splattered wall. Ahead of them was an auburn door, with a gold handle. From where they were standing Eternity could see that the door was connected to the main house via a long passageway. She found it odd that she hadn’t noticed the door on their way to the shed, but then she decided that she was not really observing her surroundings while following Betty.

The voices of people singing could be heard from inside. Sometimes a single person sang, while at other times Eternity could hear other voices joining in. They were singing in a language that Eternity didn’t understand. The singing was melodious, and Eternity could pick out the different emotions that she heard in all the voices. There was happiness, devotion and peace seeping out from within the room.

She looked around to ask Betty what it was that they were saying but could not find her. She spun on her spot, observing the area around her. She then saw that Betty was standing in front of a gigantic window fitted at the very end of the bricked passageway. She kept looking inside and then glancing back at Eternity. When she caught Eternity’s gaze she called out to her quietly. Eternity ran over and looked through the window into the poorly lit room. A woman with short fluffy hair and scrawny arms dressed in a baggy red dress which resembled a bedspread was standing in the centre lifting her arms gently outwards and upwards in smooth movements. The dim lighting in the room hindered Eternity from being able to see the lady’s features, but from her greyed hair, she was able to guess that she was perhaps older than fifty. There were at least a dozen people sitting around her on red mats, all dressed in red, similar to what Eternity herself was wearing. Some were imitating the woman’s hand movements, while others had their heads bowed down staring into their laps. The girl sitting closest to the window had her right arm extended towards the ceiling, the hand of her other arm, itching her back.

The girl must have felt their presence at the window because she diverted her attention from the dance that was taking place in front of her and looked at them. Eternity and the girl locked eyes. She had started to feel deeply uncomfortable by the girl's piercing gaze and was about to look away, when the girl smiled broadly; deep dimples emerging in the centre of both cheeks. Her perfectly aligned teeth shone in the dark room. Then, bringing her right arm down, she waved with both hands. Eternity heard her whistle to catch everybody's attention. The dancing woman dropped both of her arms to her side and stared at the girl, as did the other women in the room.

'Look. It's the Holy One. She's back. She's come back to us,' said the girl, pushing herself up off the red mat.

She took a few steps towards the window and then waved again. Eternity waved back at her. In the background, the dancing woman did a movement that caused her red dress to blow outwards like the dress of a swirling dervish.

The red dressed figure slowly walked towards the window and was now standing next to the young girl. Eternity immediately recognized the two blue eyes blinking rapidly as if trying to free themselves from the thin flaps of skin drooping over them like a broken curtain. They gradually narrowed into two slits, the blueness being concealed under the folds. She hit her fist against the window and blurted out her name several times, accompanied with some unintelligible words and sprinkles of spit that settled on the window. It was Lettaya.

'I think you've angered her by disturbing the first and most important prayer meeting of the day,' said Betty.

'I didn't mean to,' whispered Eternity, pulling at the loose thread on her jumper.

'It's OK my Holy One. Don't worry,' said Betty, fluttering her eyes slowly with sympathy.

When she gazed back up, Lettaya's slits had transformed back into eyes which were covered by a red carpet of little veins.

'Do I just go in and apologise? Would that be OK?'

'I don't think it'd be appropriate for you to apologise, my Holy One. No one would expect a Holy One to say sorry. You're most definitely already forgiven.'

'How do we get in to this room then?' asked Eternity.

'From that door.'

Betty had already started walking towards the auburn door. Eternity followed. Betty lifted up an empty clay pot that sat on one side of the door and picked up a set of keys that lay underneath.

They entered the dark passageway, that was longer than it looked on the outside.

‘I met this girl today, she seemed to know me from before and invited me for a catch up.’

‘What?’ said Betty, raising her eyebrows.

‘A girl,’ said Eternity. ‘It seemed like she knew me.’

‘Whoever knows you is within the boundaries of this house my Holy One. There’s no one else. What did she want?’

‘She didn’t really say. She said I wasn’t around for a long time and wanted to talk.’

As they strolled down the corridor, a familiar smell hit Eternity. She felt the same painful contractions in her stomach that she had felt the previous night, when she had first walked into the kitchen. She hadn’t felt hungry until then and realized that she hadn’t eaten since yesterday. The smell was the one she had inhaled last night, and as they walked further down the corridor it became stronger.

‘It doesn’t matter if she wants to talk anyway,’ said Betty, ‘It’s not like we’re allowed to go anywhere.’

‘I can’t go if I wanted to?’ Eternity remembered the way the meat had melted in her mouth.

Ignoring Eternity, Betty called down into the corridor: ‘Who’s delivering the meat to the river today?’

‘Natasha,’ blurted a voice from a room down the corridor.

‘So, you’re not allowed to go anywhere?’ asked Eternity.

‘No, my Holy One. We’re not allowed to mingle with outer people. They don’t understand us, and they are harmful. If we are to go into the outer world we go together, and we make sure that we protect one another. There’s a lot of punishment if we go outside, my Holy One. It’s even in the books.’

‘What do you mean by harm?’

‘We’ve even been attacked by a homeless man. He grabbed Serena by the hair once. We tried to save her, and when we pulled, big chunks of her hair came out and they haven’t grown

since. The man always sleeps in the same spot down the road and we're scared to go that way now.'

They stopped just before they got to the section of the corridor that curved to the right.

'This is the room,' said Betty.

'I can't hear anything. Are they even in there?'

Betty placed her finger over her lip. 'You mustn't make too much noise,' she whispered. 'They're probably in the start-of-the-day trance.'

'What's that?' asked Eternity.

'It's when our souls leave our bodies and go to...' Betty was interrupted by the emergence of a petite girl, who resembled a bird with her pointy long nose that curved downwards over the centre of her upper lip. Her face was dotted with freckles like overcooked oats.

From inside came the noise of shuffling as if things were being slid across the floor. The small girl stood staring at Eternity, her eyelids fluttering rapidly.

'Chiara, have they finished?' asked Betty.

Chiara nodded.

'Hi, I'm...' Eternity was about to introduce herself when Betty elbowed her in the ribs.

Chiara crossed her arms over her chest, making a perfect X, her fingertips holding onto her shoulders. Then, she bowed down and starting speaking. Her thin high-pitched voice was painful to the ears but did justice to her bird-like figure.

'My Holy One. You are back. Back to where you belong.'

Eternity looked down at the girl who was slightly shorter than her. A few pimples jutted out of the girl's face like rosebuds desperate to blossom at the turn of spring.

'My Holy One. I hope you are well. That your spirits are high. That your communications are thorough. With them. With the loved ones that bring us all together here. To this place.'

'Have you spoken to them again my Lord? Is that why you're here? To tell us about what they've wanted to communicate with us?'

Eternity leant in towards Betty's ear and whispered:

'I haven't seen anything. Shall I tell her the truth?'

Betty closed her eyes and nodded assuredly.

‘Have you seen them my Holy One? I can see it written all over your face... that you have.’

Eternity shook her head before saying: ‘No, I haven’t seen your dead children.’

‘No, my Holy One. They may be dead in this world, but they’re out there somewhere in another world.’ Chiara twitched her thick proud eyebrows. ‘Maybe soon it will be my time and you’ll get to see my Emma my Holy One. You will see her, I’m sure. She’s been departed for five months.’

All of a sudden, the clang of metal came from the end of the corridor. Three bongs.

‘It’s Natasha. She’s calling me. I must go. My Holy One.’ She detached her hands from her shoulders and let them fall to her side, bowed down in front of Eternity and then scurried away.

Eternity looked after her and couldn’t help but smile at the way she ran; her arms pressed to her sides, her hands flapping like a page of an open book exposed to the wind.

Eternity quickly evaluated what the girl had told her. The girl’s remarks had not shocked her, as Betty and Lettaya had already told her about *how* vital she was. Her presence made the grieving mothers happy because it was only through her that they could contact their deceased children.

As she was deep in thought Lettaya emerged at the door. Betty bowed, and Eternity copied her.

‘Not you my Holy One. Only the grieving mothers bow. We bow to everyone who helps us through this nightmare. You bow to no one.’

‘Is your memory not back yet?’ asked Lettaya, tenderly flicking Eternity’s hair over her shoulder.

‘She’s OK Blessed Coordinator. It’s slowly coming back to her.’

Eternity was about to tell her that nothing was coming back to her at all but decided against it. Betty was probably lying for a reason.

Lettaya looked down at her watch and then turned to Betty: ‘It’s almost three. You need to start getting the baths ready Betty. Prepare the list of who’s going to bath with who. You have about half an hour to do everything.’

‘Your orders are my duties Blessed Coordinator,’ said Betty.

‘I’ll come and check up on you in fifteen twenty minutes. I need to put a few finishing touches to that new sermon.’

Lettaya walked back into the room and closed the door behind her. Eternity could hear her footsteps gradually fading away as she ambled further into the room.

‘I need to go,’ said Betty. ‘I’ve got to get the bath ready.’

‘Can’t I come with you?’ asked Eternity.

‘No, my Holy One. You mustn’t do any chores. They’ll be an announcement in about half an hour, calling everyone to the communal bathing session. Yours will be straight after this session.’ Before Eternity could say anything, Betty jogged around the curve of the corridor and was out of sight.

Eternity gazed down the corridor towards the way that they had walked from. She thought about whether she should open the door of the room Lettaya had entered, but then thought that if she’d wanted her to accompany her she would have most certainly invited her in. She aimlessly strolled down towards the entrance of the corridor, glancing into every room with an open door. All the rooms seemed to be serving a different purpose, although Eternity could not say what each room’s function was. The room diagonal to the one that Lettaya had entered was tiny. It barely fit three white tables that were arranged in a U-shape. There were six chairs tucked in around the table. A white board at the front of the room, had a few words bullet pointed one below the other in red marker.

- Rowena’s eight aniversari
- Must go to antiaborsionit protest, must organyze one ASAP.
- New member: Becca.

The room on the opposite side had the same layout, but instead of a white board it had an overused black one; the wood underneath revealing itself in patches. The room further down had two beds placed on either side of an old cupboard, made of diarrhoea-coloured wood. The top half of the cupboard had two doors which were shut, while the bottom had two layers of bookshelf-type compartments. Several framed photos were sitting randomly on these shelves. In one of them a girl was seated on the same wicker chair, her long blonde hair draped down her left shoulder, her hands stiffly cupped in her lap.

The door of the room further down was closed, but Eternity knew that there was someone inside as she could hear pots and pans being dragged, lifted and placed back down. A strong scent of burning mixed with a floral smell was making its way out from the room into

the hallway. The smell awakened in her a sadness that she didn't understand, but nevertheless she wanted to carry on inhaling it. She knocked on the door. The sound from inside immediately ceased and she started thinking that she had imagined all the noises. Then the door was opened by a tall young woman with features that did not belong together. Her mouth was too large for her chin, her eyes too wide apart, her nose too small for her broad face. The young woman didn't say anything but looked back into the room. Eternity stared into the room from between the woman's arm. Standing in front of a counter was an older plump lady, who was holding a thin black stick from which was rising a greyish smoke. In her other hand was what looked like the meat that Eternity had eaten the previous night. The thick brown sauce dripped out of the woman's hand, down onto the counter and plopped on the floor. She stared at Eternity with her tiny green eyes.

'I thought the kitchen was somewhere else, on the other side,' said Eternity.

Neither women spoke. Their faces were as white as the few long strands of hair standing on end on the young woman's chin. The long stick the plump woman had been holding fell from between her fingers, burning a tiny hole in the rug she had been standing on. It let out a thick mist of smoke before it died out.

They started whispering to one another, even though Eternity was standing in between them now. She listened.

'It is the Holy One,' said the young woman to the other.

'Yes. Do you think she's seen one of our departed?' said the older to the younger.

The younger woman shrugged.

Eternity remembered how Betty had assured her to tell the truth earlier on.

'I haven't seen any departed,' said Eternity. 'Everyone's run off to do their own things and I'm just stuck here by myself. I heard you in here, so I knocked.'

The younger woman looked directly past her at the older one again. Her hand slid off the door handle, pulling it down and letting out a loud deafening noise as it sprang back up.

'What do we do now?'

'We forgot to bow down. You know... what the Blessed Coordinator told us to do if we were to ever come across the Holy One.'

The older woman dropped the piece of meat onto a white plate and wiped her hands onto her apron. A single sludge fell onto her furry red slippers, splattering into a doughnut

shaped circle. They both positioned their arms into an X shape over their chests and bowed down successively.

‘Holy One we welcome you into our space,’ said the older woman.

The younger woman shook her head in approval.

‘There’s no need for that,’ said Eternity. ‘I’d like to help with whatever you’re getting ready.’

Both women stiffened, their arms still firmly placed against their chests. They looked at each other. Eternity noticed that the younger one had an irregular shaped bald patch on the crown of her head. She remembered the story that Betty had told her about the homeless man who had snatched a large chunk of hair out of a Serena’s head.

‘I want to help,’ said Eternity.

‘No, my Holy One. You cannot. This is our job alone. Your duty is a very holy one, you shouldn’t let these simple matters distract you.’

‘But I’m not practicing my duty now,’ said Eternity. ‘I don’t see anything.’

‘You will my Holy One. You always do.’

Suddenly, a loud cough reverberated through the whole of the building. The two women stood there unmoving, as if they hadn’t heard anything. Eternity, viewing the women’s indifferent attitude thought that only she herself could hear the sound. Was she connecting with the other world finally?

The sound continued, followed by an authoritative voice: ‘Ladies the bath is now ready. These are the names that will be attending the quarter past three session. Chiara, Natasha and Serena. The names that I have not read out should get ready for the four o’clock session.’ The voice, which Eternity recognised to be Betty’s, coughed, then a tap and a squeak was heard, before there was silence once more.

‘We need to go my Holy One. It’s our bath time now. We hope we see you again when you’ve spoken to the departed.’

The older lady pulled her apron off and dumped it on the counter. Then, they both walked out hand in hand.

After the women left the kitchen, Eternity walked out of the building’s doors, strolled over to the front balcony, and sat on the edge of the lifted wooden balcony, her legs dangling over the side. She felt like crying, but like her breath, her tears were wedged in the bottom of her throat. Nobody wanted her near them. It wasn’t so much that they didn’t care, it was more

that they did not know about her memory loss and treated her as if she knew the ways of the house. She pitied her previous self, as she pitied herself now because she was lonely, who everybody respected but nobody wanted to spend time with.

The sun was beginning to lose its strength. She contemplated the possibility of really not having lost her memory. Maybe this was all she knew. This was all she was; a title and a duty. But then what was she doing down at the river and how did she not remember going in?

CHAPTER 7

She had taken a step in through the slightly ajar door of the House when she felt her shoe stick to something on the floor. She gazed down and noticed that a blank white paper was stuck to the bottom of her shoes. When she bent down to pick it off, she realised that the paper was not blank at all, but on the underside had a list of instructions written in bold red writing. She gently peeled away a damp browned leaf that had stuck to its centre and read:

Among the many obstacles that are hindering you from moving on and being happy is your family. Particularly the male members of your family. These could be your husband, your partner, a brother, a cousin, an uncle etc. Brothers and fathers are not so much feared of but they too should be kept away. These relations are the biggest distractions in your life. They have no necessity. They will only stop you from moving on.

Always look ahead— to the future, never to the past. Your main aim is to move on, to keep on hoping that you will attain happiness again. So, even if you have to carry out an evil deed to reach this stage, do it, because this is the only chance you get.

But remember, have nothing to do with your relatives. In this journey, you have neither loved ones, since you have lost the one/s you love the most. No one else can replace the love that you have for your children. This means that you are alone. Forget about your past. There is nothing there but darkness. And as you know darkness is nothing but hell.

Eternity folded the piece of paper into a tiny square and placed it into her pocket. Where was her own mother to hold her by the hand like the freckled boy in the book? Were they separating her from her too? She would ask Betty when she saw her next. From the window above the door she could hear the sound of water running and splashing, and the occasional thuds of things being dropped.

‘Hello, can anybody hear me,’ she shouted out towards the window.

Three women emerged at the window. They were naked, their breasts sagging downwards out of the window like plump lemons on a tree. As soon as they saw Eternity they disappeared from the window, and then it wasn’t long before Betty appeared. She, too, was naked, her breasts bouncing back and forth on the window sill.

‘Can I come up?’

‘No. It’s not your turn yet. Yours is at... I can’t remember now. Give me a second.’

She went in, and then leaned over the window again.

‘Half four.’

‘What do I do till then?’ asked Eternity, hoping that Betty would ask her to join them.

But before she could get an answer Betty had gone back in, and Eternity was left to occupy herself.

CHAPTER 8

It was out of sheer boredom that Eternity had decided to go back down to the river to find some possible clues about how she had ended up there the previous day. She had to be quick before the women had finished bathing and it was her own turn.

When she got to the river, the first thing she noticed was the flattened grass where her red shoes had been lying the previous day. She sat on the edge of the river and dipped her legs into the cold water.

She spoke out loud to herself, listing all the things that she was curious about but did not have any knowledge of.

‘You must have another life out there. There must be other people that you know. Like a mother just like in the book. You also don’t know how you ended up being a part of these people. Lettaya told you that you did not lose a child. So how did you end up a part of them? Wasn’t there any place else that you could go? Somewhere happier. Somewhere with less fear.’

Eternity stopped thinking as she noticed something at the bottom of the river. She pushed herself down into the water headfirst, swimming towards the thing that had caught her attention. She plunged her hand at it and grabbed it into her palm. Wrapping her hand tighter around the object, she pushed herself out of the river. She cringed as she felt the coarse object dig into her palm. She was sure that she was bleeding.

When she sat back on the edge of the river, she opened her palm and, ignoring the puddle of blood that had gathered in its centre, she stared at the object. It was the same cratered stone she had picked up from the riverbed the previous day. She recalled placing it into her coat’s pocket. She had changed into the clothes that Lettaya had brought down for her and left the coat on the floor in the sitting room. She remembered the book she had put into her coat pocket too and wished that she’d had it with her right now, to write about the cratered stone. To write down her emotions when they were still fresh, because she felt as if the sooner she wrote things down the quicker she’d be able to make sense of things. The faster she’d understand who she really was.

Although she tried to assure herself that this was not the same stone that she had picked up that day, a sinister side of her was trying to convince her that she was insane, that all her memories were false and that she had not even come across such a stone before.

She dipped her hand into the water a few times, washing away the blood that had collected in her palm. Then placing the stone into her pocket, she decided to walk back to the house.

She thought of the stone on her journey back. How the river had given birth to it and then how it had given birth to the same one, or a similar one, again.

CHAPTER 9

When she had finally made it up the hill and climbed onto the road in front of the house, she beat off the soil that had clung to her clothes (especially her knees) and picked off the bits that had adhered to her hands. The tips of her fingers were dotted with small patches of earth, and the shape of her bony knees were outlined on her red trousers. The journey up hadn't been an easy one. What would Betty think when she saw her? She was, indeed, in desperate need of a bath. She stood on the pavement opposite the house and stared up at it. The bathroom window was open, but there was no movement from within. Was it half four yet?

Now that she had learned some of the stories of the women living in the house, the sign of the door made much more sense. She hadn't really had much time to look at it properly the previous night, but now the pink half heart was shining like a Betty's lips. She thought that the other half of the heart, which was replaced with a narrow X must represent the departed children. These women's hearts were never going to be complete again. The X was always going to weigh down heavily within them.

Eternity noticed that the front door of the house had swung open. Standing at the door with one hand holding the door open and a tall pink towel wrapped around her head was Chiara. She was waving her hands about. Eternity waved back at her, and approached the door, at which point Chiara crossed her arms over her chest.

'Welcome, my Holy One,' she said, and bowed down. She must have noticed the mud stains on Eternity because it took her a while to rise back up and when she finally did, her eyes were still gliding back down towards Eternity's knees. 'What happened my Holy One? Did you have a fall?'

'There's nothing to worry about,' said Eternity. 'I just went exploring, got tired and sat down a bit.' She didn't dare tell Chiara that she had been crawling up the hill.

The door gradually swung back and knocked into Chiara's back. Chiara's small frail body couldn't handle even the slightest tap and she fell onto Eternity. Eternity held onto her.

'I do really apologise, my Holy One,' said Chiara, lifting herself off Eternity. 'I'm so so sorry.'

'It's OK,' said Eternity. 'There's no need to apologise. You don't need to keep your arms crossed over your chest, you know. Especially when you're falling.'

Chiara's arms were still crossed over her chest. She was gazing down.

'Look up at me Chiara. It's OK. It's no big deal. What time is it?'

Chiara slapped her forehead, then started cursing herself. 'Stupid me. I'm so stupid. Sorry, my Holy One. Yes, it's past your bath time. Betty was calling out to you and we couldn't find you. I'll go tell her you're here.'

'Shall I come with you?' asked Eternity.

'No, my Holy One. I'll be right back.'

Chiara ran up the stairs while Eternity stood in the doorway, enjoying the gentle breeze tickling at her face. She pushed the bronze large vase next to the cupboard and propped it in front of the door to keep it open. She sat on the top step past the balcony and closed her eyes. She could hear voices coming from the distance. It didn't take long for the voices to be clearly audible and for her to hear that they belonged to Chiara and Betty.

'Where is she?' she heard Betty ask.

'Downstairs... and she's got all mud all over her.'

'Mud?'

'She went exploring apparently,' said Chiara.

'Exploring. Why would she go exploring?'

'I don't know.' There was silence. 'Is she OK?'

'Of course, she's OK. Stop asking so many questions and get her,' said Betty.

From somewhere behind her in the lower floor of the house Eternity heard a raucous laughter, along with a few claps.

She turned around to look into the house, but she couldn't see anyone. Suddenly Chiara emerged at the stairs, holding tightly onto the balustrades.

'Is there someone at the back?' asked Eternity.

'Yes, my Holy One. All the girls are out there. They're waiting for you my Holy One. It's Keira's daughter's death anniversary today. You're going to give a speech.'

'I am?' asked Eternity.

'Yes, my Holy One. You were preparing a speech.'

'Oh...yes...I was,' said Eternity, trying to figure out how she was going to deliver a speech that she did not recall preparing.

'Betty is waiting for you upstairs. Your bath is ready.'

‘Yes,’ said Eternity. She stood up. How was she going to get to the bathroom? She didn’t even know which way to go. ‘Would you like to take me?’

Chiara hesitated. ‘Of course, my Holy One. Whatever you ask.’

Chiara descended and grabbed Eternity’s arm. They started walking up together, slowly and one step at a time. When they reached the landing, to their left was a tall window with dark green draperies. Chiara pulled them aside. Down in the back lawn were a gathering of several women; some old, some young, but most of them the latter. She recognized the two women that she had seen in kitchen standing side by side. There was a few that she had never seen before.

‘Come on, my Holy One. It’s just down this way.’

Eternity was still for a while longer, and then she moved her head compliantly, staring into Chiara’s face.

‘You OK, my Holy One?’

‘Are all those women waiting for me?’ asked Eternity.

‘Yes, my Holy One. Of course they are, who else would they be waiting for?’

She walked with Chiara down the corridor. When they were about halfway down, they stopped, and Chiara pointed to a white wooden door.

‘Betty is inside my Holy One. She was getting everything ready for you.’

Eternity could hear the swishing of water. Chiara knocked on the door, and shortly after it was opened by Betty who was completely naked and had a light pink towel wrapped around her head.

‘Where have you been...my Holy One?’ asked Betty, ‘I prepared the shower for you ages ago and have been waiting since. It’s really hot in here, even with the window open, I’m dripping.’

Eternity wanted to tell her that she had been down at the river, exploring and trying to figure out what had happened to her the previous day, but instead, a few incomprehensible sounds escaped her mouth.

‘What?’ said Betty, ‘Anyway, come on now my Holy One, everybody’s waiting for Keira’s anniversary night tonight. We better hurry.’

‘Shall I go then?’ asked Chiara.

‘Yes, you can go,’ said Betty. ‘Tell them that we’re nearly done.’

Betty pulled Eternity into the room and shut the door behind them. The room was a large one with ten separate shower heads aligned one next to the other high up on the wall. There

were two separate names hanging under every showerhead on a white plastic plaque. In the far corner was a raised platform that could be climbed up to from two stairs jutting out of the side. The showerhead above this platform was a glittering gold. Underneath it on a golden plaque was written the words: **The Holy One**.

Eternity climbed up onto the platform and turned the round tap. She had only just touched it when a flood of water spurted out, spraying all over her head and flattening her hair.

‘My Holy One,’ sighed Betty, ‘You can’t bath with your clothes. You need to take them off. Here, let me take them off for you.’

Eternity moved back.

‘But, you’re here,’ said Eternity, looking at Betty through one eye, as the water continued to bounce off either side of her head.

‘I am,’ said Betty, ‘But, being naked is OK here my Holy One. We believe it’s freedom. It’s liberating.’

‘Are you sure?’ said Eternity, ‘I don’t feel comfortable at all.’

‘I’m very sure,’ said Betty, who was now also standing on the platform, unzipping Eternity’s jumper. She flicked the tap, and the water instantaneously stopped pouring out.

Betty started laughing, and Eternity stared at her, trying to figure out what it was that was so funny.

‘What is it?’ asked Eternity.

‘Nothing, my Holy One. Your self-consciousness is quite funny. I’ve never heard of anyone in this house feeling uncomfortable about being naked before. We spend most of our days naked. It’ll all come back to you soon,’ said Betty, throwing Eternity’s t-shirt and bra towards the door.

Eternity was about to tell her that she wasn’t uncomfortable, but that she didn’t know what was right or wrong anymore but as she opened her mouth, the water from the showerhead sprayed into her mouth and prevented her from speaking, so she just nodded instead.

CHAPTER 10

As Eternity ambled towards the nylon-clad shed with Betty, where she could hear whispers coming from behind it, the sun was setting, surrounding them with a soft pink light. She hesitated near the auburn door which concealed her from the view of the women.

‘Betty,’ she whispered. ‘I don’t know what to say. Chiara told me that I need to make a speech, but I don’t know how.’

Betty stopped and turned to Eternity. ‘Don’t worry, my Holy One. I picked up the speech that we prepared together.’ She plunged her hand into her trouser pocket and pulled out a folded yellow paper. Eternity unfolded it. The slanted writing was tiny, and she could barely make out one word from the other. But, she wasn’t going to complain.

‘It’s not normally done this way,’ said Betty. ‘Normally, you memorize this and then do the speech by heart. But, you know... considering that you don’t remember, I thought I’d carry it along. It’d have to do for today. Just read from the paper.’

Betty grabbed Eternity’s hand and quickened her pace.

After a few steps, they were in the midst of the whispering women. When they noticed Eternity’s presence they crossed their hands over their chests and bowed down. A woman with red-framed spectacles who was standing further away from the others, had not joined the chest-crossing ritual but was holding a green shirt, and burying her face into it every so often.

Eternity watched silently as the women bowed in front of her, taking occasional glimpses at the woman with the spectacles who looked deeply in pain. Her mouth was turned downwards, her lips slightly open, drops of saliva dripping from the sides. She wasn’t crying out loud, but Eternity could tell that she was inside.

Betty poked Eternity in the ribs with her elbow. ‘That’s Keira,’ she said.

Eternity didn’t know what to say. ‘Is she OK?’ she asked. Of course, she’s not OK, she thought to herself. Today is when her departed child’s death took place. Betty gazed at Eternity with a disappointed expression. Eternity looked away.

‘OK ladies,’ said Betty. ‘Go and grab your babies now and of course your pillows and make yourselves comfortable.’

Babies? thought Eternity. What babies? Weren’t all their babies departed?

The women ambled over to the fence that separated the house from the house next door and grabbed the pillows that were leaning against it. Then, they grabbed the dolls that were hanging from the metal rail standing near the pillows.

‘Make sure you get the right ones,’ shouted Betty. ‘Look at the tags around the neck. We don’t want to go through what happened last time.’

Keira was still standing in the same spot, her head buried into the green clothing.

‘Grab Keira’s too ladies,’ shouted Betty.

Eternity’s mind was churning with several questions about how she was going to get through the speech. Her doubts must have reflected on the expression on her face, because Betty grabbed her hand and placed it in between her two palms.

‘It’s going to be OK,’ Betty assured her. ‘Just read from the paper. Look at it as much as you need.’

Eternity nodded. ‘Thank you,’ she said, pulling her hand away.

The sun had almost set now, and the four lights hanging on the back walls came on. The women were all seated, some were hugging onto the dolls as if they were real, while others had dropped the dolls into their laps, looking up at Eternity, possibly waiting for her to start the ceremony. Keira who was sitting at the far right had dressed the doll with the green clothing that she had been sniffing.

‘Go on,’ said Betty, giving Eternity a push.

Eternity stood in front of the women, her back to the house. The light in the window behind her was on, and from within the room she could hear a voice chattering, too quiet for her to be able to understand what was being said.

‘Start. Come on, my Holy One’, whispered Betty, who was slowly walking towards her.

Eternity was distracted by the voices coming from within the house. She tried to gather her thoughts and opened the paper in front of her.

‘Hello,’ she started. ‘As your Holy One. The Agent Between the Living and Dead, it is my duty today to once more bring to mind the memories of our beautiful Clarissa. Our lovely Keira’s daughter.’ Eternity turned to look at Keira who was gazing down affectionally at the doll and stroking its head. ‘She passed away exactly on this date five years ago at the age of three.’ Eternity couldn’t read what was written next, the words blurring before her eyes, her head heavy and her mouth dry. She pulled the paper closer to her face, but it didn’t help. She coughed, hoping that Betty would understand that she was having trouble and would come over

to help her. When nobody came to her aid, she decided that the best thing to do was to guess what the next two words were. ‘Our Mighty One...’ continued Eternity.

‘Almighty,’ whispered Betty, loud enough for everyone to hear.

‘Our Almighty One,’ corrected Eternity, ‘as his name suggests, is all forgiving and all accepting and will no doubt forgive and accept all the sins and errors our Clarissa has carried out in this world, although we know that in the three years that our baby was alive this cannot be many.’

Eternity lifted her eyes from the paper and looked at the women, all staring up at her with blank expressions on their faces.

‘Today we will remember our lovely Clarissa, learn of her life and death. For this, I invite Keira to give us an account of how she lived and how she died.’

Instantly, Keira stood up, as if she was impatiently waiting for Eternity to read out her name. She carried her doll with her, her forearm wrapped around its neck, its face buried into her breast.

From the window behind them, Eternity could hear a slow-paced mellow music, as if it had especially been put on to accompany Keira’s speech. When she reached Eternity, Keira crossed her arms over her chest with a struggle, as the doll was still pressed firmly against her chest. The doll’s head was now deeply buried into Keira’s breast and its arms were splayed backwards.

Eternity bowed down to her too, and Keira bowed down further.

‘Come on, my Holy One,’ whispered Betty. ‘Let Keira speak.’

Eternity left her spot and ambled over to Betty. Betty grabbed her hand and squeezed it.

Keira stood in front of the women. Her belly weirdly blew in and out. She started, not looking at any one in particular, but staring downwards, as if she didn’t care whether any one was listening to her at all.

‘I was a good citizen once. Several years ago, long before all this happened. Until the minute it happened actually. I would go to church every Sunday, put up a stall every few weeks selling cakes and jewellery that I’d made myself for charity.’ She walked over to the pillow that she was sitting on, picked up something bright green from under it, and strolled back towards the front. It was a wig which she placed over her head with one hand, lopsidedly.

‘I was a very kind and thoughtful person. Always helped the elderly cross the road and never pocketed any money which I found on the floor. I had not worked for them, so I would give them all to charity to benefit others who needed them more than I did. Every single penny. Then my baby, my Clarissa was born six years ago.’ Perhaps, feeling that the wig was not perfectly aligned on her head, she pulled at it from one side.

‘She was a beautiful baby, with her round black eyes. Just like her fathers. But one day something happened. And as I repeated last year and the year before, I want you all to listen very carefully. It wasn’t my fault. Because it can only be your fault if you’re a hundred percent remember doing the bad deed. What I mean by this is that it can only be your fault if your mind was all present, when you were doing what you were doing. And I don’t remember if I done it or not.’ She cradled the baby’s head in her arms.

The older plump woman that Eternity had encountered in the kitchen raised her arm up and shouted: ‘Liar, Liar, Liar.’ Keira ignored her and carried on.

‘I might have but I really don’t remember. I would like to remember though. Just to convince myself that all that happened was not my fault. It all started in this organization that we, me and my husband, were part of up in Lancashire. We had been members for several years, in fact that is where we met and married. One day...’ Eternity could see that Keira’s face was distorted with a sinister smile.

‘You liar,’ said the plump lady again. ‘You murderer. You did it and you know it, but you’re a coward. You’re too scared to admit it.’

Betty left Eternity’s side and raced over to where the plump lady was sitting. She sat down beside her and held her hands in her own. Eternity couldn’t hear what Betty was saying to her, but the plump lady’s slackening facial features suggested that it was something calming.

‘Carry on,’ yelled Betty from the back.

Keira coughed. She wasn’t smiling anymore but was once more gazing solemnly towards the ground.

‘Anyway,’ she started. ‘It was one day three years ago that I woke up to find that Clarissa was not on the pile of pillows beside our bed where she normally slept.’ She paused. Her veiny hands were shaking, causing the doll’s limbs to vibrate.

‘She was literally nowhere. Just disappeared into thin air. Getting any outer person involved was forbidden in this place, but my husband called them anyway. The police came. Our leader, the messenger from high above was not happy at all. To get revenge for making the

outer a part of this she accused us for murdering our baby. The police agreed. They accused us too. How could a mother do that to their own child?’

The plump woman lifted her arm up again, and Betty pulled it back down. Eternity heard Betty shush her.

‘Can you believe that? They said that someone spanked the life out of her. That they beat her till life left her body and never returned. I saw her. She was bruised everywhere.’ Keira moved her hands over her body to show the locations on Clarissa’s body that were bruised. The doll fell to the floor, face down and she did not attempt to pick it up.

‘I had this friend Jenna, who I used to sleep in the same bed with before I got married. She testified against us. She said that she had seen us beating Clarissa. She said that she was too scared to intervene. Too scared that we were seriously out of our minds and might kill her too. Maybe we would have if it had really been us. But, I don’t remember it happening.’

‘It was you,’ shouted the plump woman. Betty slapped her on the back of her head.

‘She told the police that our Clarissa had pushed the leader’s five-year-old down the stairs while they were playing. This had angered the leader. She ordered the child, our child, our Clarissa to apologise to Wendy, her child. But our baby was too stubborn to speak. Just like her father. We begged her, and she cried, and she screamed, but we couldn’t get her to apologise. That is exactly what Jenna told the police. The leader told us that if our baby didn’t say sorry then she would make sure that we would all burn in hell. The fire in hell would burn at our skin bit by bit all the way down to the bone, she said. We were scared. Terrified. Nobody wants to burn.’ Keira hugged the doll closer to her chest, then loosened her grip and let it fall to the ground.

‘Jenna told the police that we were scared and that we beat our own Clarissa to show the leader that we were incredibly sorry and did not want to burn in hell. But, I can’t imagine ever doing that to my own little baby. I would never hurt my baby. But, apparently, I did hurt her. According to Jenna, I watched while my husband beat her to death, until blood collected all over her body. With a wooden spoon. For more than two hours. Non-stop. Just beat her. She was covered from head to foot in purple when they found her. I saw her later and she really was. I don’t remember doing any of this you see. Because it wasn’t really me at that moment. My thoughts were not my own. But it also might have been. That woman had her own way of controlling us, making us forget the terrible things after we did them. Then we were taken away. To this massive building where we all had to wear the same clothes. They dragged us across

the floor from our collars if we did things wrong. They called it a care home but the way we were treated there was far from being cared for. There was a lot of us in there. Women shouted out of the blue, people spat on the floor as they pleased, they pulled their hair and eyebrows out. The best part were the flowers in the garden that bloomed no matter the mood of the people in the home.'

Eternity turned her back on the gathering. She didn't know if she could look at Keira without rage consuming her. What if she couldn't hold herself and she slapped her across the face? At that moment she felt disgust. A deep surge of disgust filling up inside her. She didn't know what that disgust would turn into when she looked up at her. How was she still allowed to stay within the confines of this house? Shouldn't she be given the same treatment that she inflicted on her own innocent child? Perhaps that was merciless, but she couldn't help thinking it. She wasn't exactly sure why she felt so angry, but it seemed to her unimaginable to kill something you created yourself.

Suddenly, the window behind them opened, and out seeped the deafening sound of a bell being rang. It was Lettaya, shaking an old bell.

'Come on ladies, the ceremony is over,' she shouted over the sound of the bell. 'It's bedtime.'

All the women stood up, picking their pillows up with them. They were about to make their way towards the front door when Betty yelled:

'Come on now ladies, hang your dolls back onto the metal rails. Make sure their tags are on. You can keep yours Keira. Just for today. And there's some stuff for you all to eat, near the front door.'

After the women had hung their dolls on the metal rail, they made their way towards the front door. Betty walked from behind, pushing the rail along with her. Lettaya had closed the window and the light in the room had been turned off.

'How are you feeling?' Betty asked Eternity as she walked past her.

'Good,' said Eternity, 'I think I managed to deliver the speech somewhat successfully.'

'You did,' said Betty, patting Eternity on the back. They strolled alongside each other, Eternity helping Betty lift the metal rail up the stairs and into the house.

CHAPTER 11

On Betty's suggestion, Eternity sat waiting on the living room sofa while the other women resigned to their own rooms. She was munching on a heart-shaped biscuit, its dark-red jam filling seeping out from all sides and dripping into her palm in which Eternity was trying to collect it in. Betty had chosen it particularly for her. 'It's the best one,' she had said. 'The least stale, the least crumbly one, the one that's retained its shape the most.' Each woman found their roommates and walked up to their rooms together, holding each other's hands tightly, as if they were scared of losing one another. Eternity guessed that she too would normally have entered her room and gone to bed, without having to be led to her bedroom every night. But today was an exception because she did not remember where she had been sleeping every day for the past.... She couldn't even remember how long she had been living in the house. Betty had gone upstairs to make sure that everyone got into their beds without fighting. 'They fight sometimes,' Betty had told Eternity before she had gone upstairs, 'They don't always like who they're staying with. Especially Chiara who stays in the same room with Keira. She hates it.'

Eternity hadn't said anything, but she couldn't blame Chiara. If someone could watch the killing of their own child and do nothing about it, how could anyone guarantee that she wouldn't just pick up the bedside lamp and smash it across Chiara's face, just because she felt like it?

Eternity recalled the events of the day. It had been a busy day, with all the new people she met. No doubt, she had met them before, and known them for a long time. She remembered the 'catching up' invite she had received by Hannah. 'Don't go,' Betty had told her rather seriously. 'There's punishment. No good will come from it.' And she hadn't gone, not because she didn't want to—she was in fact tempted—but because she didn't actually know what the people of the house would do to her if she were caught. She didn't feel as if she could risk it.

Eternity extended her head over the side of the sofa to check if the coat that she had left on the floor earlier in the day was still there, but there was no sign of her coat or the other clothing that she had taken off. She had placed the first cratered stone in the coat's pocket. The second cratered stone was poking out of her jumper pocket, like a tumorous lump. And her book was there too, hidden in the inner pocket of the coat, filled with everything she

remembered— a smell, a sight, a feeling—away from the prying eyes of the inhabitants of the house.

She heard someone descending the stairs. Eternity turned to see Betty, her face distorted with an expression of pain; her eyes only thin slits, a piece of cloth wrapped around her forearm. Eternity stood up and walked over towards her.

‘What’s happened?’ asked Eternity.

‘Nothing important. Just the usual,’ said Betty, pressing down on the cloth. ‘When I’m trying to separate those bratty girls from trying to strangle each other this can happen.’

‘Who was it?’

‘Keira and Chiara,’ said Betty, ‘they grabbed each other’s hair as soon as they walked into the room. Keira scratched me when I tried to separate them.’

‘Well...’ started Eternity condescendingly.

‘I know what you’re going to say my Holy One. Why is Keira even here if she’s a baby murderer? But, if we throw her out, it will go against the purpose of the house. We promise to take in all grieving mothers with departed children. She may come across as cold and unregretful, but I can’t imagine a mother who is not even the slightest bit affected by the death of their child. And, that slight bit of grief is enough for us to take them in.’

‘But she watched,’ Eternity said.

‘It doesn’t matter my Holy One. She still grieves.’

Eternity didn’t want to argue with Betty. As the person who remembered the least, she had no other choice but to trust the person who had the most memory.

‘Betty... I took off a green coat today and left it on the floor over there, but it’s not here now.’

‘Oh yes my Holy One. Was that old worn-out coat yours? I placed it on the pavement outside, thinking that maybe someone will pick it up.’

‘It was mine,’ said Eternity, ‘I was wearing it down at the river.’ She hoped that no one had found it and claimed it as their own.

‘That’s odd, my Holy One. I didn’t know you owned such a coat. We don’t wear anything but red here. That was green and very old. I’ll come with you my Holy One,’ said Betty, extending her hand out and touching Eternity’s arm.

‘That’s OK,’ said Eternity, ‘I won’t be long anyway.’

Eternity rushed out of the front door and jogged down to the pavement. She was relieved to see that the coat was still where Betty had said she had left it. She patted the coat down and felt the sharp corners of the book in the left side of her pocket, the roundness of the cratered stone on the right. Unclasping the clip, she pulled it out and lifted it up towards the moonlight. Side by side, the moon and the stone looked so much alike.

From the corner of her eye, she saw a figure emerge at the door, then Betty's voice call out to her:

‘My Holy One? Are you OK? Did you find it?’

‘Yes,’ shouted Eternity, and she placed the stone back into the coat’s pocket, draped it over her arm, and made her way towards the house. ‘Here,’ said Eternity, lifting her arm up to show Betty that she had brought it along with her.

‘It doesn’t smell very pleasant my Holy One. Would you like me to throw it in the washing for you? I’m going to wash some clothes tomorrow.’

‘There’s no need to,’ said Eternity, ‘I’m not going to wear it anyway.’ They stared at each other in silence, then Eternity said: ‘I’m tired.’ She could feel a heaviness in her head and was having difficulty keeping her eyes open.

‘That’s OK, my Holy One. It’s past your bedtime,’ said Betty, looking down at her watch.

Eternity wrapped her arm around Betty’s and they slowly walked upstairs. Eternity tilted herself away from Betty every few steps when she realized that she was letting her whole body weight fall onto her.

When they reached the upper landing, they turned towards the communal bathroom and walked further down the corridor. They stopped in front of the room at the far end, and Betty pushed the door open.

Betty led Eternity towards the bed in the dark. Eternity laid down, the softness of the mattress caressing her body from head to toe. Her eyes closed slowly, and her whole world was an endless darkness, until Betty put the light on and she flittered off the bed.

‘It’s OK, my Holy One,’ said Betty, as she attempted to unwrap the coat from around Eternity’s arm.

‘Betty?’ said Eternity, allowing Betty to take the coat away from her. ‘How long have I been living here?’

‘Since the beginning my Holy One.’

In her mind she thanked Betty, turned to her side and let sleep take hold of her.

CHAPTER 12

When she awoke it was broad daylight, the sun was shining through the thin netted curtains, settling on her duvet. She sat up, rubbed her eyes with her fists and then placed her hand over the warm spot on the duvet, which caused the thin hairs on her wrist to stand up as the heat struck them. The house was as quiet as it had been when she had first set foot into it.

She gazed around her room. It was a little cosy room, with minimal furniture. There was a two-seater sofa, pressed against the wall at the far end of the room, a small weathered desk that was chipped all over with a silver pot of colourful pens placed on its centre. In the far corner of the room was a green sink, a tiny frameless mirror hanging over it.

She strutted along the bed on her knees and gazed out of the window. White iron bars ran across the outer side of her window. The presence of the iron bars took her by surprise as no other window of the House seemed to have them. She spotted the green coat draped over the arm of the sofa, and ambling over to it she retrieved the book from the left pocket and picked out a green pen from the pot on the desk. She flicked open the book and turned to the second page. She gazed down at the pictures. **Cat**, she read under a picture of a fluffy brown animal with perfectly round green eyes, its mouth bold black and turned upwards like the mother and child on the previous page. *I've said sorry a thousand times, that's why I remember it so well*, she wrote. *A dead eye is soulless. I remember the smell of sad things, like flowers burning, just like the burning stick in the kitchen, the rising of this floral smoke and then its sudden absence. I know the slow painful utterance of a song, as if the heart is singing it rather than the mouth. The lack of memory is a black void, with no bottom, side, or roof. Things are going to come back to me. They will.* As she closed the book, placed it back into her coat pocket and dropped the pen onto the sofa she heard whispering outside her door. Eternity slid her feet towards the door to make the minimal amount of noise possible. She listened.

‘We can’t find Chiara anywhere,’ said one voice.

‘What do you mean?’ asked another. ‘Have you checked everywhere?’

There was a silence.

‘The Blessed Coordinator’s gone to check down at the river. Were you here when Rina’s body washed up by the river a couple of years ago?’

There was another few seconds of silence.

‘The Blessed Coordinator thinks that it’s something like that again.’

Her whole body numbed at the mentioning of a body by the river. She had also found herself in the river no more than two days ago. Now another body at the river? Another body had apparently been found there a couple of years ago. Maybe Betty would know about it. It was possible that the body in the river could also shed light on what she was doing down at the river too.

Eternity listened as the woman closest to her door let out hums of acknowledgement, after every possibility that was proposed by the other woman. Two possibilities were listed; that she had fallen into the river and been carried along far away while pouring in the daily food donations. However, the woman emphasized that although the meat was missing, they couldn’t be sure that Chiara was the donation deliverer on this particular day. The second possibility was that she had run away from the House.

‘Chiara had every reason to leave,’ said the woman furthest away from Eternity’s door. ‘She was forced to stay in the same room as Keira. I mean, you tell me, how can you sleep next to a murderer?’

‘Don’t you remember when Rina was strangled down at that river.’

‘I remember,’ said the other woman, ‘Her body came floating back to where they thought she had been killed.’

Eternity was contemplating whether she should open the door and join the conversation. They obviously knew things that she herself did not remember. For example, who had killed Rina and why? Why would they even think that anybody would want to leave the house? Had someone left before?

They had started gossiping about Keira, especially how she did not look sincerely upset when she was delivering her speech. Eternity, not wanting to lose the opportunity of finding out what had happened to Rina, pulled open the door.

The woman who was standing farthest away from the door was the plump lady, whose name Eternity still did not know even though she had encountered her several times. The other woman, whose face Eternity could not see entirely, as she was standing with her side to the door, was one that Eternity had seen at Keira’s ceremony, but had not come across anywhere else. The plump woman’s face was frozen in terror, her large round eyes open wide, her head pushed back, highlighting her double chin that covered half her neck. The other woman was also unmoving, and from her tense muscles in her neck, which jutted out of the flesh like

mounds in a flat field, Eternity could tell that they were not expecting to be interrupted in this way.

‘What’s happening?’ asked the woman to the plump one.

‘It’s me,’ said Eternity.

‘It’s the Holy One,’ approved the plump woman.

The plump woman crossed her arms over her chest, and the other woman followed, turning to face Eternity. She too had a freckly face like Chiara’s, some areas spluttered with an orangey-brown denseness, while other parts were a light shade of pink.

‘We do sincerely apologise,’ said the plump woman, bowing down.

‘It’s OK,’ said Eternity, ‘I wasn’t sleeping anyway.’

‘We didn’t know you were in there my Holy One, with it being so late.’

‘What time is it?’ asked Eternity.

‘At least half eleven my Holy One.’

The other girl was wheezing.

‘Shush,’ murmured the plump woman at angrily. She had a pink plastic bag hanging from her elbow.

‘You were saying something about missing people.... from the house,’ said Eternity. She realised that the house was awkwardly quiet. ‘Has everyone gone to look for the missing girl?’

‘Yes. I mean, no my Holy One. Well, yes Chiara has gone missing my Holy One, but no everyone is at home doing their own things at this time.’

‘What happened?’ asked Eternity.

‘Chiara went missing my Holy One.’

‘How did she get lost?’ asked Eternity, gazing down the corridor.

‘We don’t know my Holy One. The Blessed Coordinator is going to look down at the river.’

‘And what about that girl who was killed a few years ago. I heard you speaking out here. I wasn’t listening. I just happened to hear while I was...doing somethings inside.’

‘Oh Rina, my Holy One. Don’t you remember that she was strangled my Holy One?’

Eternity thought about whether she should tell them about her memory loss, but she decided against it. There was no need to bring up something that was soon to pass. As Betty had assured her everything would all come back to her eventually.

‘I do,’ said Eternity, ‘but it’s just that I’ve forgotten who it was done by.’

‘Oh, we don’t know my Holy One,’ said the plump woman. ‘We do have a lot of enemies though.’

‘It could be the people living around here,’ said the other woman, her wheezing still audible amongst her words. ‘They all hate us here, my Holy One.’

All of a sudden, piercing the silence in the house, came a few successive taps and a deafening screech. Then a voice who Eternity recognized as Lettaya’s.

‘Ladies, this is very important news. I’m sure you’ve all heard by now but let me announce from here in case anyone has not. Chiara is missing. In about half an hour I want us all to meet in the Coordination room.’

Then the three taps were heard again, followed by the same teeth-grinding screech.

‘We better go my Holy One. We need to get ready. Get dressed and all,’ said the plump woman bowing down. The other girl bowed too, her nose scraping Eternity’s arm as she did so.

‘But you’re already dressed,’ said Eternity.

‘The ceremony of a missing person requires another piece of clothing my Holy One. We need to dress for the ceremony as you know.’

‘What do I wear then?’ asked Eternity.

‘Your usual, my Holy One.’

Eternity watched as the two women walked side by side, the plump woman’s hips hitting into the other woman with every step. She closed the door behind her and hoped that Betty would visit her before the half hour was up. She had no idea what they wanted her to wear.

She opened the rickety wardrobe. Several empty hangers of all colours were hanging on the rail at the top. On one side of the wardrobe was a large puffy piece of clothing hanging on a thick black coat hanger. Eternity couldn’t quite make out what it was from where she was standing. So, she picked it up, initially with one hand, and then two, as the clothing was too heavy for her single arm to handle. She dropped it onto the bed and spread the material about. It was a long frilly red dress, with a hard-plated corset. The half-heart symbol of the house was elegantly sown on the corset with shiny gold sequins.

She went back to see if there was anything else in the wardrobe, and on the bottom shelf, concealed by the dress, but now visible in all its elegance was a dome-like object, with alternate red and gold streaks running all around. Eternity picked it up. It was heavy, much heavier than the dress and had a hole in the bottom. Eternity realized that it was a hat, and she popped it on

her head. Although, it perfectly fit her head, she had difficulty balancing it. It kept wanting to tip from side to side. She tensed her neck and was eventually able to hold her head up straight, but every time she attempted to make her way forward with it on, her head uncontrollably slanted from left to right.

She removed the hat and placed it on her bed, to make it easier for herself to put on her dress. Taking her trousers and jumper off she dumped them on the floor by the bedside table and stepped into her dress. It wasn't a comfortable fit, as the sides of the corset pressed into the skin below her armpits and squashed them in, but it would have to do.

There wasn't a clock in her room that could inform her of the time, so using her own judgement she decided that the half an hour was almost up. She placed the hat on her head, opened her door, and walked down the corridor, occasionally using her hands to stop the hat from toppling off.

CHAPTER 13

When she reached the bottom of the stairs, she stood thinking about how to get to the Coordination Room. From its name and the fact that she had seen Lettaya, who was referred to as the Blessed Coordinator, encircling her arms about in every direction the previous day, she guessed it was the room where the start-of-the-day trance had taken place, at the end of the corridor jutting out of the auburn door. Certain that she would get lost if she attempted to find her way from indoors, and then end up being late for the gathering, she made her way out of the front door.

She prayed that Betty would turn up to guide her and thought about calling out to her, but then decided that she couldn't always rely on Betty. Plus, Betty had all the other chores to do. So far, she had observed that it was her duty to make sure that everyone was present during the gatherings, and that it was also expected of her to ensure that all the women were getting on all right. That they were kind to one another, and happy in each other's presence, that they didn't throw insults at the other, and that they were safely put to bed, without wrapping their fingers around each other's throat. The last thing she wanted was to give her more to do.

Eternity stepped out and closed the door behind her. A yellow car drove past just then, and whomever was sitting on the passenger side opened the window and shouted something that Eternity could not quite make out. However, she clearly saw the middle finger that was extended out of the window and directed towards her.

She made her way around the side of the house, and although she couldn't clearly see what lay on the other side of the large window of the Coordination Room, she identified that there was movement from within. When she got to the auburn door, she noticed that it was locked. Betty had found the key under the empty clay pot the previous day, and Eternity lifted it, certain that she would find it under here too, but her hat went rolling off her head onto the grass. The key wasn't under the pot and her hat was on the floor, smeared in mud. She picked it up and without placing the hat back onto her head she ambled over to the large window, hugging the bulky hat.

As the sun was directly reflecting onto the window, she couldn't see who was in the room, but she could see several red figures seated on the floor. She placed the hat on the ground carelessly, thinking that it wouldn't make a difference if it picked up a few more lumps of damp soil. Placing her hands on either side of her face to block out the sun, she saw Betty and Lettaya

standing near the table, and Keira, the plump lady, and three others, whose faces she couldn't see, sitting on the floor. Lettaya was flicking through a large book, occasionally lifting her head to look at Betty who seemed to be speaking to her while also keeping her eyes on the seated women who seemed restless. Keira kept laughing in a deranged manner, her head thrown back, all her teeth fully visible, but no one seemed to be paying any attention to her apart from Betty who seemed not to care that she was behaving in an awkward way that did not comply with the bored expressions on the other member's faces. The plump woman, fidgeting with her hands in her lap, looked like she was ready to beat someone up.

She knocked on the window. Betty gazed at her, lifting her index finger towards her.

Eternity watched as Betty exited the door of the Coordination Room and turned into the corridor towards the door, then she heard the lock being turned on the other side. Betty stepped out onto the small concrete platform and gazed at Eternity. Eternity had picked up her hat and was making her way towards Betty, when Betty said:

‘What’s that you’re wearing?’

‘It’s a dress. I hope it’s mine,’ said Eternity, trying to walk with the hat without tripping over (it was restricting her from seeing where she was stepping). ‘It feels a bit tight, around up here,’ she said, lifting her arms up to show Betty the bulges that had formed just below her armpits.

‘It is yours my Holy One. But, I don’t think it’s appropriate for this occasion. Unless, you’ve had some visions of course.’

From behind Betty emerged the plump woman. She waved at Eternity. Eternity unable to wave back because of the hat, smiled and tilted her head.

‘What you doing here Natasha?’ asked Betty.

Natasha, thought Eternity. Now I finally know her name.

‘I saw the Holy One wearing the Holy dress,’ said Natasha. ‘I just wanted to ask...you know... if she’s seen my baby.’

‘Go back inside,’ said Betty, tapping Natasha’s upper arm.

‘See you inside my Holy One,’ shouted Natasha, ‘I hope you’ve seen my baby.’

‘Why would I have seen her baby?’ asked Eternity.

‘Because you’re wearing that dress. You only wear that dress when you’re sitting for a vision, my Holy One. Has everything not come back yet?’

‘No.’

‘It will though my Holy One. I can assure you.’

Somebody was calling at them from inside, Betty’s name made its way down the corridor, as well as the through the large window behind them.

‘We need to go,’ said Betty. ‘You’re going to get everyone excited, but the dress will have to do for now. Do you want me to carry the hat for you?’

‘No,’ said Eternity, ‘I might as well put it on.’

The corridor considerably narrowed as she popped the hat on. She grabbed onto Betty’s arm with one hand and used the other to hold onto the hat.

‘Chiara is missing,’ whispered Betty as they were about to enter into the room.

‘I know,’ said Eternity. ‘Natasha told me.’

When they walked into the room, Natasha must have told all the women inside that Eternity was wearing the vision dress because everyone was standing up, their arms crossed across their chests.

‘My Holy One, you’ve seen my lovely Clarissa?’ asked Keira.

‘My Ben,’ said the tall woman that Eternity had seen in kitchen with Natasha.

‘What about my Sumira?’ said Natasha.

‘My Cassandra, Elena, Rachel,’ said the other three women. Eternity could not distinguish who had uttered which name.

Eternity wanted to hide behind Betty or melt in between the tiles on the floor and get sucked into the ground.

‘Ladies, ladies,’ said Betty, stepping in front of Eternity and extending her arms out to either side. ‘Stop pestering the Holy One. She’s not seen anything. Something else happened... well, nothing that is of concern to any of you.’

‘Sorry,’ said Eternity, quietly.

‘There’s no reason to apologise my Holy One,’ said Betty, and she dropped her arms down to her sides.

Lettaya who was standing stiff and upright near the table at the front of the room, taking small sips from a glass of purple juice, put the empty glass on the table. Eternity couldn’t help but interpret the way Lettaya had placed it down as filled with anger, or worse, disappointment. She made her way round the table, clapped and then glowering at everybody in the room, but more so at Eternity, she said:

‘Ladies, please seat yourselves. And you my dear,’ she turned to look at Eternity, still scowling, ‘can remove that hat from your head and just put it right here on this table.’ She patted the table.

Betty helped Eternity take the hat off, and Eternity cautiously put it on the exact spot that Lettaya had indicated. Lettaya leaned her bottom against the table.

‘What’s going on?’ she hissed as Eternity was about to walk away towards Betty, who was standing in the centre of the room with an anxious expression on her face.

‘Nothing,’ said Eternity, not as quietly as she had expected too, and she scurried over to Betty.

Betty grabbed Eternity’s hand and squeezed down on it gently.

‘My Blessed Coordinator,’ started Natasha. ‘Has our Holy One seen any of our departed?’

‘That is not our topic,’ said Lettaya, folding her arms. ‘The Holy One is just a bit confused at the moment.’ She glared at Eternity, who looked out of the window. A yellow ball that she had seen near the shed the previous day was swerving on the lawn. ‘Now, as you all already know Chiara is missing. We have no idea where she is or what has happened to her. As you see everybody’s not here.’ She lifted her finger and started counting the women in the room silently. ‘Some of your friends have gone to continue the investigation down at the river.’

She made her way around the table again and opened the large thick book to what seemed like a random page. One side of the book fell onto the table with a thud, and tiny particles of dust rose and shimmered in the sunlight.

‘In case, you don’t know Rowena called a few minutes ago. They’ve found the body. Chiara’s been drowned. So, I’ve come up with a new regulation. No one is to go out by themselves, not even for the donations. You hear me?’

‘Drowned?’ yelled Betty, slapping her thighs repeatedly.

‘Yes,’ said Lettaya.

There was an unsettling movement within the room, as the women huddled closer together, locked their fingers and swayed backwards and forwards, humming a grievous melody that fluctuated in volume and withered out in a squeak before continuing again. The atmosphere became even more unbearable with every passing minute as the lamenting murmurs got louder and more frequent. The women crowded into the centre of the Coordination room, each of them looking down and shedding tears that fell down their faces in long sad streaks. They looked up

occasionally and hurled curses towards the ceiling: ‘Sinners’ they said. ‘What do you want from us? Haven’t you already taken enough?’

Eternity felt a heavy lump, not at the bottom of her throat this time but in the centre of her stomach, growing gradually and taking over her whole body. She felt like she weighed a ton. She looked down at her feet and noticed that her legs were as thin and bony as before and understood that the weight was nothing but that of grief.

‘Do we know who did it my Blessed Coordinator?’ asked Betty. Her arm having consumed its anger, swung back and forth, gently touching her thigh.

‘No,’ said Lettaya. ‘It’s not important. It could be anyone. Anyone’s willing to get rid of us out there. You know that.’

Betty shook her head in agreement.

When the humming in the room transformed into an ear-splitting screech of pain, Lettaya picked up the book and slammed it on the table. The shrieks instantaneously ceased, the women let their hands fall to the ground, and turned to look at the source of the sound.

‘In any case ladies,’ started Lettaya, raising her eyebrows. ‘We couldn’t do the morning gathering today because of what happened, so we’re going to do it now. Is that understood?’ Eternity noticed how reserved and cold Lettaya was.

‘Yes, my Blessed Coordinator,’ said Natasha. The others nodded in unison.

‘OK,’ she said, ‘Let us begin.’

‘Do I repeat as well?’ whispered Eternity to Betty.

‘You might as well,’ said Betty, without looking at Eternity.

‘The first clause,’ started Lettaya. ‘We are together and together we are stronger.’

‘We are together and together we are stronger,’ repeated everybody.

‘The second clause. We are together and together we are better.’

‘We are together and together we are better.’ Keira’s voice lingered on after everybody else finished repeating.

‘We need to all repeat together. Start together and finish together,’ said Lettaya, staring particularly at Keira. ‘We’ve been doing this for years. Nobody’s new, so come on, collect your energy.’ She gazed back down at the book. ‘OK. Clause number three. We are together and together we share our grief.’

‘We are together and together we share our grief.’

‘Come on ladies louder and with more energy. I know you’re upset about your friend, but we need to repeat these for her. Number four. We are together and we are the only ones living life the right way.’

‘We are together and we are the only ones living life the right way.’

‘Is there any other way?’ asked Lettaya.

‘No,’ shouted everybody together.

Eternity did not know how she was supposed to respond to the question, so she remained silent.

‘Once more, this time everybody together,’ said Lettaya, glaring at Eternity. ‘Is there any other way?’

‘No,’ shouted everyone, including Eternity this time.

‘Number five. You tell me what number five is, ladies.’

‘We are together on this journey and this is our only home,’ yelled the women, some slower than the others.

Eternity remained silent again. She looked at Betty to see if she had noticed that she hadn’t joined in, but she seemed concentrated on making sure that everyone, excluding Eternity, was following.

‘Again,’ yelled Lettaya.

‘We are together on this journey and this is our only home,’ shrieked everybody in the room. Eternity was only able to repeat until halfway, because she hadn’t been paying much attention the first time, since she had wasted her energy on trying to make sure that nobody had realized she hadn’t joined in.

‘Once more,’ shouted Lettaya.

‘We are together on this journey and this is our only home.’

‘You’re doing well,’ whispered Betty to Eternity, squeezing her hand again.

‘And the last and most important one ladies?’ bellowed Lettaya.

‘We are together and have no time and space for others in our lives,’ yelled everybody.

‘OK ladies,’ said Lettaya, ‘Now I’m going to want something from each one you, something we haven’t done since we found Rina in the river two years ago. We’re going to all together say the Death of a Housemate prayer, since Chiara is dead and is not going to come back.’

Lettaya flipped through the book and stopped abruptly at a page, pressing down on it.

‘OK, now repeat after me,’ said Lettaya.

‘May this prayer reach the departed and the missing,’ started Lettaya. ‘To the souls of those who’ve gone. We, together, wish that their souls and bodies, both intact and together, reach a heavenly realm, where all is pure and white and bright.’

‘May this prayer reach...’ uttered Eternity, while everyone else said: ‘We, all together, wish...’

Betty elbowed Eternity. ‘Not the first bit,’ she whispered. ‘Just start from We.’

‘No,’ shouted Lettaya, hitting her hand on the table. The empty glass jumped up and rolled off onto the floor. ‘Together ladies. If we don’t say it together, all at the same time, then what’s the point?’

‘Once more,’ said Lettaya. ‘Come on ladies...’ she begged. ‘We, all together, wish that their souls and bodies, both intact and together, reach a heavenly realm, where all is pure and white and bright.’

‘We, all together, wish that their souls and bodies, both intact and together, reach a heavenly realm, where all is pure and white and bright,’ everybody repeated, including Eternity.

‘Where all is mellifluous, calming and sonorous.’

‘Where all is mellifluous, calming and sonorous.’

‘Where all is ethereal, surreal and unreal.’

‘Where all is ethereal, surreal and unreal.’

‘And what do we mean by unreal ladies.’

‘That its unworldly, unearthly, but not unworthy,’ shouted all the women at once, apart from Eternity.

Eternity saw Lettaya gaze over the women before settling her eyes on her. She didn’t know what to do and wasn’t certain whether Lettaya was attempting to convey some sort of message through her stare. All she knew was that it was making her uncomfortable. She bit down on the inside of her mouth, until she felt a sensation that was both excruciating but pleasant. At least it was working to distract her from Lettaya’s eyes. She looked sheepishly at her shoes that she noticed had collected a large amount of mud, threatening to fall off as soon as she moved her feet.

‘My Holy One,’ said Lettaya, after a few minutes of silence. ‘Would you kindly show some interest and join in?’

Eternity shook her feet and a single lump of mud rolled off onto the floor, breaking into several tiny pieces.

All the women in the room gasped and started whispering.

‘Wha...what was... the last... the final sentence that you said?’ stuttered Eternity.

‘Shush ladies,’ said Lettaya, ‘stop speaking to one another and answer the Holy One’s question. What was the last sentence we said?’

‘That it’s unworldly, unearthly, but not unworthy,’ shouted all the women at once.

Eternity wished that she was anywhere else but here. She balanced herself on one foot, and shook her other leg, taking pleasure in knowing that the mud would be crumbling from her shoes onto the ground.

‘It’s unworldly, unearthly, but not unworthy,’ she said nervously.

‘And what is it that is unworldly, unearthly, but not unworthy?’ asked Lettaya.

‘The place that the departed have gone to,’ said Eternity. ‘The heavenly place.’

Lettaya started clapping, which caused a ringing in Eternity’s ears. She raised the book off the table and closed it with a struggle.

‘Good,’ she said, ‘I can see that you *have* been paying attention then.’ Eternity nodded, pleased with herself.

Betty grabbed hold of Eternity’s hand again and squeezed down on it, which Eternity now knew meant that she was doing OK.

‘That’s it ladies. We’re waiting for the others to come back now. When they’re back we’ll understand better what’s happened to Chiara.’ She coughed, then lifted her head to face to the women. ‘And one last thing. When and if we manage to bring Chiara’s dead body home, we’ll try and do it discreetly without having anybody from the government knocking on our doors like last time. But of course you never know people in this neighbourhood are always looking, always inspecting us, and if for whatever reason they get suspicious and the police come, there could be no sign of grief. Just don’t speak. Act as if you don’t know what they’re talking about. Don’t forget they don’t know how many of us are here, so they can’t prove that someone’s missing.’

‘Where’s the body?’ asked Betty.

The women stood up and picked up their pillows, with Natasha struggling, as she was pulled down by her own weight. A girl with a protruding Adam’s apple extended her arm, and

Natasha held onto it; her fingers splayed out on the floor for support. Eternity could see the girl's neck muscles tensing desperately, almost extending out beyond her jaw.

'Rowena's coming to get the wheelbarrow,' said Lettaya, pushing the book to one side of the table. 'They're going to carry her up to the house. I told them to cover the body up with soil or whatever gardening equipment they can find. We don't want people, you know those around here, to suspect what's going on. We don't want the authorities getting involved.'

'And then the funeral ceremony I'm guessing, my Blessed Coordinator?' asked Betty.

'That's right,' said Lettaya. 'Today or tomorrow. We'll make an announcement.'

Lettaya slowly walked away to the furthest corner of the room where a tall crooked bookcase stood filled with musty books of all sizes.

'What happened to Rina?' Eternity asked Betty, taking advantage of Lettaya's distance.

'She was the first death in this house, and it wasn't a pleasant sort of death, that's why we never want to talk about it,' she said. 'It was a very very brutal death.' She walked towards Eternity and placed her mouth close to her ear. 'The symbol of our home was scratched all over her body with some sharp object. Every single spot. And we believe she died of blood loss.'

'From a few scratches?' asked Eternity.

'It wasn't just a few,' said Betty, running her hands over her body. 'It was everywhere.'

Both Betty and Eternity's attention was drawn to an extensive scream that came from one of the women. By the time they turned around the scream had subsided, Natasha's face was red and puffy, and Keira had her face turned towards the window, quivering. The other women were looking at one another suspiciously, their eyes narrowed, and their lips pursed.

'What's happening now?' Betty berated them. 'I mean, I can't give my attention to something else for two minutes, and you're around each other's throats again. Natasha? You have anything to tell me? What have you done to Keira this time?'

CHAPTER 14

‘Did you see the Blessed Coordinator walk out the room, my Holy One?’ Betty asked Eternity. Betty bent down and picked up the glass from under the wooden table. A thin layer of the dark purple juice had stained the bottom.

‘No,’ said Eternity. ‘She must have gone out when we were speaking before the fight.’

‘I guess so,’ said Betty. ‘Shall we get you out of that dress?’

Before Eternity could answer, her attention was drawn to a sudden fluorescent pinkness that had emerged on the other side of the large window of the room.

‘What do you think?’ she heard Betty ask.

She nervously turned towards the window. It was the girl in the pink pyjamas. Although, the pyjamas were not the same ones she had been wearing a couple of days ago, they were still pink, but a much brighter shade. Printed on the centre of the t-shirt was a ginger cat with paws too large for its body.

‘My Holy One. You OK? What is it?’ said Betty.

The girl was standing in the middle of the lawn, staring right into her eyes. She was carrying the same oxidized bronze pan; a plastic carrier bag was placed into it again. It was sitting on the flat palm of her right hand, pulled close towards her chest. Was the girl able to see into the room? When she had attempted to take a glimpse of the room the previous day, and earlier on that day, she hadn’t been able to do so without blocking the sunlight out with her hands. But, that must not have been the case for the girl in the pink pyjamas, she thought. She could obviously see into the room, as she had pinpointed her eyes onto Eternity’s and was not diverting them.

‘My Holy One? Is everything alright? You’re worrying me,’ said Betty.

The girl’s lips moved, too quickly for Eternity to read them. Eternity took careful steps towards the window and pressed her face against the window. It steamed up as she breathed out. She took a few steps back, waited for the steam to clear away and then pressed her nose against the glass again.

‘Can you see somebody my Holy One?’ asked Betty eagerly, now standing close behind Eternity.

The girl’s lips moved again. Eternity read ‘Yes.’

‘My Holy One is there someone outside?’

Eternity focused on the girl’s mouth and read: ‘Yes there is.’

Eternity placed her arm around Betty and pushed her closer to the window.

‘Look,’ she said, gesturing towards the window. ‘Can you see anything at all out there?’

Betty looked puzzled. Her shoulders were pulled up to her jawline, concealing her neck.

‘Anything at all?’ asked Eternity.

‘What am I supposed to see?’

‘A girl in pink pyjamas?’

Betty gazed out of the window. ‘There’s nothing my Holy One,’ she said. ‘No girl in pink pyjamas. Or anybody else.’

‘Look. She’s right there.’ Eternity pointed at the girl.

‘There my Holy One?’ asked Betty, gesturing towards the spot which Eternity was pointing. Eternity observed that the girl’s mouth moved again. She was certain that the girl could hear all that was being said in the room. ‘No, my Holy One. Nothing. There isn’t anything.’

‘Ask me another question,’ said Eternity, not taking her eyes off the girl in the pink pyjamas. ‘Something more complex? Something else, not about what I can see out of the window.’

‘What, my Holy One?’

‘Come on, anything,’ said Eternity. ‘What’s your favourite colour? What’s your favourite animal? Just anything.’

‘OK, my Holy One. What day is your birthday then?’

Eternity read the girl’s lips: ‘Twelfth of November two thousand and two.’

‘Twelfth of November two thousand and two,’ said Eternity.

‘What about the twelfth of November, my Holy One?’ asked Betty.

‘That’s what the girl in the pink pyjamas is saying,’ said Eternity.

‘My Holy One. Are you having a vision? Seeing my beautiful Laura perhaps?’

‘Was she born on the twelfth of November two thousand and two?’ asked Eternity, making sure that she did not divert her eyes from the girl.

‘No, my Holy One,’ said Betty, itching the top of her head. ‘Twelfth of November was...I don’t quite remember now, but I think its Chiara’s girl, my Holy One.’

Eternity was ecstatic, she could feel her heart beat at the back of her throat. She threw herself onto Betty and wrapped her arms around her chest. Although not returning her enthusiasm entirely, Betty hugged her too. She couldn't believe that she was finally having a vision. The only problem being that she couldn't hear what the departed child was saying.

'Am I supposed to hear them speaking?' asked Eternity, unwrapping herself from around Betty and staring back out the window.

'You always have,' said Betty.

'But I can't hear them now,' she said. She immediately felt defeated but knew that even being able to see them was better than not being able to fulfil her role at all. Maybe, as Betty had told her about her memory, it would eventually come back to her.

'It will come back to you my Holy One, I'm sure,' said Betty, and she pulled Eternity closer towards her and gave her a powerful hug, which Eternity felt would break her ribs.

Eternity rested her chin on Betty's right shoulder and continued looking at the girl. Then, the wind pressed the plastic bag down into the saucepan and from it emerged something brown and furry. It was some sort of animal, two large ears flopped down on either side of its head. From the angle that she was standing at, she identified a single black shiny eye, wide open, a thick scarlet line running through the fur next to it. It was a rabbit, that looked as if it had been terrorized. Eternity thought how this was the last expression it had on its face before it had been slaughtered. An expression of fear and a desperate need for mercy. What was the last thing that it had seen, before its life had been stolen by the people of the house? The newly sharpened tip of a knife perhaps.

'Our donations have reached it,' said Eternity, her voice muffled by Betty's hoodie. 'She's holding a dead rabbit.'

'I'm glad to know they have,' said Betty. 'It's just bad that her mother is not here to hear this.'

'Maybe I'll see her too,' said Eternity.

'I doubt it,' said Betty. 'You've only ever seen the children.'

Eternity watched as a kitten trotted towards the girl. It climbed up the girl's legs, digging its claws into her pyjamas, and when it had reached the pan it stared in, its tiny nose wriggling about. It must have found what it had smelt appetizing because it leapt into the pan and stared chewing on the scared eye. A gush of blood exploded all over the kitten.

'Don't we ever eat here?' asked Eternity, trying to ignore what she'd just seen.

‘Only once a day and nothing big. We get by on vitamins of all kinds. You’ll be taking yours in a bit. The Blessed Coordinator doesn’t like us eating. She says eating more than your body needs is gluttony.’

She chose not to tell Betty about the kitten’s brutal act, because she wasn’t entirely sure if the kitten even existed. Nobody told her that she was able to see animals. Dead children? Yes. Kittens? And possible departed kittens? No idea. Maybe, she was tired and so her empty mind had started inventing things that were not even present.

Then, the girl lifted both her arms into the air, dropping the pan from her grip. Eternity was expecting the pan to fall to the ground and the animal innards to scatter all over the grass, but that was not the case. Instead, the pan wavered to and fro in mid-air and finally settled on the grass. The girl waved at Eternity, then drew half a heart and then an X to one side.

Eternity disentangled her arms from around Betty.

‘Anything else you see my Holy One?’ asked Betty.

Eternity looked back outside. The girl, the kitten, and the pan had disappeared. Only a green shiny bug, walked over the grass and disappeared where the grass was dense.

‘No,’ said Eternity sadly. ‘They’ve all gone.’

‘Were their others as well my Holy One?’

‘No,’ lied Eternity. ‘Only the girl in the pink pyjamas.’

The door of the room swung open all of a sudden, and both Betty and Eternity, turned to see who it was that opened the door with such urgency. It was a well-kempt girl with long eyelashes hanging over her eyes. Eternity had not noticed that she had long fluorescent orange nails, and now that she had noticed them she could not take her eyes off them. She kept moving her hands around, panting to catch her breath, trying to say something and failing. Eternity watched the nails circulating in the air, too close to her face at times, causing her to wince with the fear that she would poke herself in the eye.

‘Simone. What’s happened?’ asked Betty. ‘Have they brought Chiara?’

Simone nodded. ‘Yes,’ she panted. ‘She’s not in a good state. Finger marks around her neck and our symbol drawn all over with some sharp object.’

Betty pressed her fingers deep into the wells of her eyes. ‘Where is she?’ she asked.

‘Just outside the door.’

CHAPTER 15

Betty did not want Eternity to see Chiara's battered body, claiming that it would be too much for her to cope with, especially since she had no recollection of similar events from the past. 'It's best that things come back to you slowly,' she had said, while they walked to Eternity's room together. 'I don't want you to have to face such an unpleasant sight and I'll bring the vitamin pills up for you too in a bit.'

Eternity sat on her bed, and crossed her legs underneath her, trying to stop herself from imagining Chiara's slashed freckles. After a couple of minutes of contemplating whether freckles were alive or dead, part of the skin or not, she felt that the inside of her mouth was the driest it had ever been. She strolled over to the sink in the far corner of her room, gazing around, with the hope that she would see a cup laying around somewhere. There was no sign of a cup. She could call for someone and ask for a glass of water, but she didn't want to bother anybody, especially with all the drama that was unravelling downstairs. She turned her head to the side, and opened her mouth, but to her dismay the water running out of the tap did not align with her mouth. Instead, it splashed onto her nose and splattered to the side of the sink, before dripping onto the floor. She lifted her head, cupped her palms and let the water gather in it. She sipped at the cold water and felt it sliver down her chest.

The frilly dress was digging into her underarms, causing a frustrating itch. She flicked at her skin with her fingertips and tried to decide what she wanted to do. Then laying eyes on the green pen, seemingly squashed between the sofa's two cushions she remembered her book. Pulling it out from her coat pocket, she flicked to page three, **I am Marty, the dog**, she read under the picture of a yellow dog with large floppy ears, its paw raised up as if it were waving. *I know minutes from seconds and hours from minutes only by how they feel. Hours are long and minutes are shorter but sometimes seconds can feel the longest.* Having filled the top margin of the book, she started writing at the bottom one. *I feel bored sometimes. Don't ask me why. Maybe because no-one seems to ask me who I am. They don't care to know more about me. But if they did I wouldn't know what to tell them anyway.* Occasionally, she heard cars driving past...then, she remembered that she had been invited to 'catch up' tonight. At The Bean. Eight o'clock.

She desperately wanted to go, but then wasn't even sure why she wanted to meet up with Hannah so much. Wouldn't it just be easier for her to stay in the house? And plus, Betty

had already warned her that they were not allowed to come into contact with the outer world. Even though at first, she had dismissed Betty's comments as mere nonsense, she wasn't so sure now, with all the stories that she had heard about the torture the murdered girls had had to experience. First Rina and then Chiara. What if they captured her while she was out and did the same to her, scratching her flesh with a sharp object, wrapping their fingers around her neck until she could breathe no more? But then again Betty's warning had strengthened her desire and made it much more appealing. She was desperate to find out what it was that was so harmful in the outer world; what the people in the house were avoiding by confining themselves into this small self-contained fortress that they had created for themselves. It was also likely she would discover that the outer world was not so bad after all, that living in this limited space was a waste of a life. Maybe, then she could convince them to give life another try, give the outer world another chance.

It occurred to her that she didn't know where the High Street was. The Bean, Hannah had said. Where was this Bean? It doesn't matter, she whispered to herself, there's bound to be someone out there, in the outer world, who would guide you. You'll figure it out once you're out of here.

She tucked the book under the sofa's cushion along with the pen and made her way onto the bed, pushing herself towards the window. Keira was outside, yawning and carrying a large red brick. Eternity opened the window and called down:

'Keira. Keira.' Keira continued her stroll towards the back of the house. 'Keira,' shouted Eternity, this time with more force.

Keira froze and gazed around, her eyebrows knitted and her mouth slightly open. Eternity could see her red tongue revealing itself from between her lips.

'I'm up here,' shouted Eternity.

Keira gazed up. The red brick fell out of her grip and rolled a couple of times, before it lay on its side, almost concealed amongst the thick grass. She crossed her arms over her chest and bowed.

'My Holy One,' she said, 'Would you like me to come up?'

'No,' said Eternity, immediately regretting her harsh tone. 'I mean. There's no need to. I was just going to ask the time.'

Keira pulled back the sleeve of her red jumper, gazed down at her wrist, and said:

'It's almost half six my Holy One.'

‘OK, thank you,’ said Eternity, getting ready to close the window.

‘Just rest today my Holy One, for yoga tomorrow.’

‘Thanks Keira,’ said Eternity, and shut the window.

Right, thought Eternity, kneeling on the bed, I have less than an hour and a half to find something to wear, leave the house and reach The Bean. Or, should I go like this? It didn’t take her long to decide against it, as she could feel a slow pulse around her armpits where the dress was uncomfortably digging in.

She hopped off the bed and was about to make her way back to the wardrobe for a more in-depth examination, just in case she had missed a piece of clothing that she could possibly wear at the ‘catch-up’ meeting, when she felt something preventing her from moving freely, wrap itself around her foot. Eternity gazed down and saw that it was thick weaved material, with alternate brown and black stripes. It was attached onto a heavier object because when she attempted to free her leg, the material resisted movement. She bent down, peeped under the bed, and pulled the object by the handle. Out slid a large dusty suitcase. The top part of the case curved in towards the centre, and it was unzipped halfway. She pulled the zip the rest of the way, and to her dismay she was hit in the face with the strong smell of mildew and mothballs.

Inside the suitcase was a tattered black blazer folded in half, and a red flannel, a few of its small black buttons missing. She picked them up with the tips of her fingers and threw them onto the bed. There was no way she could wear them with the strong scent that was threatening to leave her unconscious. It was best to leave them out a bit and pray that the smell would disappear by the time she had to leave. Still, she was happy to have found something else to wear apart from her frilly dress. It was either these or her homely jumper and tracksuit bottoms that were dumped at the foot of her bed.

She dropped the lid of the suitcase, and without zipping it up pushed it back under the bed, just as there was a knock at the door.

‘My Holy One?’ said the voice at the door. It was Betty.

Eternity did not respond but remained kneeling. She thought about whether she should call out to her. If she did, there was a possibility that Betty would suspect that she was getting ready to leave the House.

‘My Holy One?’ said Betty again.

Eternity stuffed the blazer and the flannel under the duvet and patted it down.

‘Yes,’ she said.

Betty opened the door. Eternity was surprised to see that her face was an unhealthy shade of white, and there were large dark circles surrounding her eyes, even her full lips had taken a purplish hue. She was holding a tray with a several plain white tubs on it.

‘What’s happened to you?’ asked Eternity.

‘The body, my Holy one. Chiara’s body. It’s the worst I’ve seen. Rina’s wasn’t this bad. It’s made me a bit... you know... woozy... seeing her like that.’ She placed the tray on the table. ‘And here are your pills, my Holy One. Just one of each.’

The silence within the house was broken by clapping and hissing sounds, as if there was some sort of celebration.

‘What’s happening downstairs?’ asked Eternity.

Betty was staring at Eternity with a frozen expression. ‘It’s the girls,’ said Betty, with the same unchanging look. ‘It’s their way of saying bye. Clapping is for the joy that she brought to our lives, and hissing allows them to express their anger.’

Eternity was curious about what they were going to do with the dead body, but she was more eager to get rid of Betty as soon as possible.

‘Shall we get you changed out of that dress, my Holy One?’ asked Betty.

The hissing sounds from downstairs intensified.

‘I’m fine,’ lied Eternity, pulling her stomach in to allow the dress to slide down, and stop digging into her underarms. ‘I’ll just wear the clothes I was wearing earlier on. I haven’t worn them for long anyway.’

Betty nodded. ‘We better get rid of that coat.’

‘I’m going to throw it out...later.’

‘I’ll do it now my Holy One,’ said Betty, taking a step towards the sofa.

‘No.’ Eternity immediately regretted her aggressive tone. ‘I’ll do it later.’

‘Don’t tire yourself out my Holy One,’ said Betty. ‘It’s yoga day tomorrow. Eight hours. Non-stop.’

‘I’ll just lay down now and try and get some sleep,’ said Eternity. She felt her palms sweating and wiped them on the sides of her dress.

‘We’re all going to be in our rooms, my Holy One. We need to get plenty of sleep today for yoga tomorrow. You should to my Holy One,’ said Betty, scratching her eyebrow. ‘If you need anything I’ll be in my room too.’

Betty stepped out of the room and was about to close the door, when she returned.

‘It’s the room on the other end of the corridor,’ she said. ‘There’s only a single room on that side anyway.’

‘OK,’ said Eternity, watching Betty shut the door.

CHAPTER 16

The house was dark. It was only after she had tiptoed towards the banisters, that a bright white light reflected into the lower hallway from the tiny observation window on the front door. She tiptoed down the stairs, taking extra caution to control her breathing, as her body was on the verge of disobeying her, a thin whistling sound escaping her nostrils every time she breathed out. When she reached the door, she picked the first pair of shoes she could get her hands on and let herself out.

She rapidly walked, almost jogged, down the road, to get as far away from the house as possible. When she couldn't see the house from where she was standing she stopped and stared at the wisps of cloud that were partially concealing the moon. She gazed around to identify anything around that could give her a precise indication of what direction she was to take. She saw a rectangular metal slab further down the road, partially concealed by a bush dotted with red berries. Violet Grove, the sign wrote. She hugged the coat tightly, relieving herself from the stress she had been experiencing all day.

She sat on the pavement and slid her feet into the shoes that she had picked up from behind the door before she'd ran out. They were a few sizes too big for her, and her feet glided backwards and forwards as she walked. She remembered that she'd forgotten to take the pills that Betty had left on the table.

As she was about to walk further down the road, the door of the house in front of her opened and a teenage boy with big frizzy hair stepped out onto the threshold, which was brightly-lit with a glass domed lamp. Eternity watched as he bent down to tie his shoe laces, before he stood back up and made his way down the steps and along the concrete-tiled pathway. He slid the lock of the gate, the clanging of metal echoing in the chilly air, disturbing a dog which ran from behind the sparse thorny rose bushes towards the back of the house.

The young boy thrust his hands in the pockets of his hoodie when he noticed Eternity. He froze, terrified, and Eternity was certain that he was holding his breath. Eternity stared straight at him, trying to suppress any sort of sound her distressed body would make. She was relieved when a high-pitched whistle escaped, from what Eternity guessed, was the boy's nose. At least one of them was showing a sign of life.

‘I’m not going to hurt you,’ said Eternity, conjuring up her courage. The boy was much smaller in size than her after all, and if he attempted to do anything to her, she would press the coat she was holding firmly onto his nose. She was certain that this move would be enough to scare him away. ‘It’s just that I’m looking for this place. The High Street.’ She took a step towards him. ‘Could you help me find it?’

Eternity noticed that the boy was moving his hands around in his pockets, as if he was searching for something but was unable to grasp it.

‘Do you know The Bean?’ asked Eternity, undraping her coat off her arm, and holding it between her two hands.

‘It’s you...’ the young boy said.

‘You know me?’ asked Eternity.

‘You lot killed my dog,’ said the boy, between gritted teeth.

Eternity was taken aback by this. Surely it wasn’t she who had killed his dog? She couldn’t imagine herself harming another living being, let alone ending its life.

‘You’re confusing me with someone else,’ said Eternity, her voice shaking. ‘I’m not one to kill anything.’

‘But it was you,’ said the guy.

‘Us? A group of people?’

‘You’re one of them,’ said the guy. ‘I remember you. Why are you behaving like you don’t remember?’

Because I don’t, thought Eternity.

‘Because it wasn’t me,’ she said. ‘Why would I kill your dog?’ Eternity looked down the gravelled road, and then back at the boy again.

‘Because you said we killed your friend, but we didn’t,’ said the boy. ‘We’re not murderers. You believed that we did, so you killed my dog. We’re just normal people. But you’re not. You’re the murderers. You murdered my dog.’

The guy had taken his hands out of his pockets and was flicking the flesh around his nails. Eternity feeling that the conversation was going nowhere, and that she was running late for her meeting, said:

‘Do you know The Bean?’

‘Shut up,’ said the boy with no emotion whatsoever.

Eternity decided to ignore his rude remark and asked again:

‘The Bean? It can’t be that far from here. You must be able to get there by walking,’ she said, draping her coat over her forearm again.

Then, Eternity saw a figure emerge at the glass balcony door of the house that the boy had come out from. The figure walked closer and then away from the door. It pressed its face against the glass door, then disappeared into the house.

‘You’re still asking me questions? Shut up,’ said the boy.

‘If you don’t want to answer my questions, then why don’t you just carry on going where you were going?’ said Eternity, occasionally glimpsing at the glass door.

‘Why don’t you go to where you need to go?’ said the guy, squinting in one eye.

‘Yes. That’s the problem,’ said Eternity, ‘that’s why I’m here talking to you, to find out where I need to go.’

Eternity observed a movement at the door. The thin curtains preventing her from being able to see clearly inside the house were shaking. From behind the curtains she could see the figure, as well as a newly emerged short and stout figure dressed in a colourful attire.

‘Just go away,’ said the guy. ‘I don’t want to walk on the same road as you. I’ll call my mum. She doesn’t like yous and it won’t be good if she comes out.’

Eternity was about to tell him that she did not appreciate being threatened, when the glass door was pulled aside and out stepped a woman wearing a summer dress. A single strap of her dress fell loosely over her shoulder. She was followed by a tall muscular man wearing bleached jeans and a long-sleeved khaki sweater that Eternity thought was too small for him.

‘Hey,’ shouted the woman, lifting her head, ‘you leave my boy alone.’

‘I’m not doing anything to your boy,’ said Eternity, ‘I was just asking something. Maybe you can help me. Do you know where The Bean is?’

‘I told you it wouldn’t be good,’ said the boy. Eternity ignored him.

‘What you gonna do in The Bean? I thought yous didn’t leave your house. Or do you only leave for murder?’

‘If you’re talking about the dog. I didn’t do it,’ said Eternity. ‘I wouldn’t kill your dog, or any dog, or any living thing.’

The woman walked over to her front door and descended the few stairs, her well-defined calves shining under the moonlight. She stopped and extended her head to get a good look at Eternity and she must have been unable to do so, because she ambled halfway along the pathway and stopped again.

‘Yous a liar,’ said the woman, her hands pressed deeply into the curves of her waist. ‘Yous was there, with a few other girls. You weren’t stoning, but you were there and looking and not doing anything, which if you ask me is just as bad as doing what theys were doing. If you don’t stop somebody from doing a bad act, yous just as bad.’

The man who was still standing on the balcony grunted.

The boy smiled at his mother, and she returned the gesture. ‘You don’t want to be standing ‘ere for long. It won’t be good for you I’m telling you. Right mum?’

‘Aha,’ said his mother, ‘That’s right boy.’ She hit her hands together.

Eternity ran her eyes along the road. All she wanted was some guidance so that she could get to The Bean.

‘So yous better bugger off,’ said the woman, ‘and don’t go bothering people again, with your directions and all that. Nobody cares. Yous all monsters.’

The man grunted again.

Eternity bowed her head and started walking down the road, looking left and right in hope of finding another white rectangular slab that would inform her of her whereabouts and potentially take her to the high street. Behind her she could hear the woman speaking to her son.

‘Bloody nutcases they are. We can’t even be comfortable in our own neighbourhood because of these nutcases. Been here for fifteen years, they’ve been here five, look at the state we’ve come to.’

‘It’s alright mum,’ said the guy. ‘I’ll be more careful next time.’

‘Well it’s not yours fault boy. I mean you were just outside your own home. We’re just living here because we know they don’t leave their bloody cult house, but we might need to consider leaving now. What do you think Eugene?’

‘We’ll look into it,’ said the man. Eternity heard a door close, and a sudden darkness settle around her. She turned around. They had shut the light, closed the glass balcony door and drawn the curtains.

She continued her way down the road, having given up searching for a sign. She strolled past dark houses and houses where lonely individuals slurped at their mugs. She walked up and down a slope, past a dimly lit building where a group of individuals chattered and chattered outside quietly before breaking out into loud, hearty laughter. Past a bench where a young girl was seated eerily whistling. Finally, she reached a road that was lit by a million lights. From

streetlamps, signs with flashing writing and the inside of homely cafes and restaurants where she could see people sitting around long tables in large groups. The road was filled with people absentmindedly walking in all directions, droopy red eyes staring aimlessly above dehydrated lips. Eternity gazed at the flashy signs of some of the shops, hopeful that she'd lay eyes on The Bean. She walked towards the right where most of the people were headed and found herself ambling under metal poles and wooden blocks on which stood young men with bright yellow plastic hats. It was then that she saw The Bean, its letters bright red and sparkly.

CHAPTER 17

Eternity burst into The Bean as if she was crossing the finish line in a gruelling marathon, arms tense and stretched backwards, hair pasted onto her face with salty sweat, and a big smile on her face because she'd made it. As soon as she entered heart-warming smells hit her which placed her in a happy mood, a smile slowly emerging on her face. She knew that she had inhaled these smells before, but where and when was lost for her. Her coat fell to the ground near the doorway and she bent down slowly to pick it up. Eternity threw the coat backwards and let it flop unevenly over her shoulder, the metal-beaded strap slapping her across the face. Her eyes skimmed the slurping, chattering, browsing, reading individuals around the tables, eager to spot the harsh contrast in tone of Hannah's blonde locks and dark purple lips.

'Babes. Baby. Here look. Here,' shouted Hannah from a table next to a middle-aged couple, wiggling her fingers in mid-air and then tapping them against her chest. Eternity thought about whether she had been seated there all along. If so, how had she not seen her? It was only when a middle-aged man leaned back on his chair that she saw that his large multi-coloured hat obscured not only Hannah but all the people sitting around the next two tables as well.

Eternity meandered through the seats and stood in front of Hannah, waiting for her to take the first move.

Hannah stood up, pulled Eternity closer towards her and gave her two invisible kisses by barely touching Eternity's cheeks with her own.

'Come on sit down,' she said, gesturing towards the red chair opposite her own. 'I thought you were never gonna make it. I been waiting here a while. About forty minutes at least. Enough time to drink two cups of mocha.'

There was a large mossy-green mug sitting in the centre of the wooden table, the inside upper-half of the cup marked with intricate dried beige swirls, a still ripe-brown liquid filling the bottom.

'I got a little lost. But I'm here now,' said Eternity.

'Well that's obvious. You want something to drink? I'm gonna order another.' Hannah rose from her seat and pushed down on her frilly white knickers that were visible over the low waist of her jeans. 'You still with me?'

Eternity glimpsed at the mugs sitting on the tables around her, hoping that they'd summon the name of the liquid within them. 'What was yours?' she asked Hannah.

'Mocha babe, mocha.'

'OK, I'll have a mocha then...'

'This one's on me,' said Hannah, 'in honour of your return.'

Hannah walked away, tugging at her jeans every couple of steps.

An unbearable smell, that nauseated Eternity hit her nose and it was only then that she realised that her coat was still draped over her shoulder. She pulled it off and dumped it on the floor beside her seat.

Hannah came back no more than five minutes later. She placed the tray on the table, transferred her first coffee's mug onto the tray and then sat down.

'Let's get talking,' she said, hitting her knees with her palms. 'Me and Denise were dead worried when you just stopped visiting. We thought we'd said something wrong. I mean you came to Denise's birthday party and that was it. Denise said you'd probably gone on one of your spiritual crazes again. And then when I thought about it, I felt that she was probably right.' She scratched her cheek with her pointy nails.

'Erm... Yes well, I was on some spiritual journey. Down at the river. But who is? What Birth...? Denise?'

'Sentences babe. You know sentences?' Hannah grabbed her mug and leaned all the way back in her chair.

'Who's Denise?'

'What?' said Hannah, blowing into her mug.

'Denise?' asked Eternity quietly, aware that the question was not helping her hide her memory loss in any way.

'It's no time for playing around,' said Hannah. 'And as a matter of fact, it's quite insulting, asking these kinds of questions after all those years of friendship.' She took a sip from her mocha and must have burnt herself because she pinched her tongue and tightly closed her eyes as if in pain.

'I don't remember,' said Eternity.

'You do,' said Hannah. 'But you're just trying to get on my nerves.'

'Not really,' said Eternity.

'Yes.'

Hannah gazed at the clock on the wall in front of her.

‘It’s almost nine. Late already,’ said Hannah. ‘And we haven’t even spoken about anything.’

‘About what?’ said Eternity, picking up her mug from the table.

‘I didn’t ask to meet up with you just to sit down in silence and stare at one another like creeps you know.’

‘I know.’

‘How was the spiritual craze this time? Last time you said you went to some mountains, this time the river. How was it?’

‘Good,’ said Eternity, sipping at her mocha and letting it rest on her tongue. She let it flow down her throat when it started to numb the top of her mouth.

‘A bit more? Surely it wasn’t just good. And what does that even mean?’ said Hannah.

‘Enjoyable. It was good, a bit cold. But, I enjoyed it.’

‘What did you do?’

‘Swam?’

‘You swam in the river in this cold?’

‘Yes. It was cold. I think I froze at one point, even lost consciousness.’

‘You would. It’s the middle of winter girl. Pray to God that you’re OK now.’

‘I’m not really,’ said Eternity, distracted by the tingling of the middle-aged woman’s bracelets as she rummaged through her bag.

‘Oh yeah. I forgot to tell you,’ said Hannah. ‘Denise is having a baby shower tomorrow. She’s really looking forward to having you there. It’s only going to be a few people. You know the twins, me, and you. She doesn’t like too much attention, so she decided to keep it small. Let me just find the invitation in here somewhere.’

Hannah searched through her bag, pulled out a few items (a tiny pink bottle, a key, and a plastic fork) placing them on her lap.

‘Oh, look here it is,’ she said, shaking a crumpled piece of paper. She blew off the small specks of dirt and extended it towards Eternity. ‘Sorry, bags a mess babe.’

‘Thanks,’ said Eternity, pinching the invitation out of Hannah’s hand as if it were an unwashed sock.

‘Oh God. Stop being so ridiculous, it’s only eyeliner,’ said Hannah, clasping her fingers together and stretching her arms up and over her head.

‘I didn’t mean it in that way. It was just reflex. You blowing on it... I always pick things up that way.’

‘Well you shouldn’t. I’m your friend so I won’t be too offended. Maybe a little bit. I won’t give you the cold shoulder. But somebody else might take offense. So, don’t do it.’

Eternity gazed down at the invitation:

Denise’s Baby Shower

Date: 19th October 2017

Address: Flat 6 Violet House

2 Violet Grove

Beeston

NG9 1PA

Time: 18.00

She looked back up and found Hannah staring at the busy road beyond the finger-smudged window.

‘Oh yeah,’ started Hannah, dropping her arms to her sides. ‘Denise has moved to a new house. About a week ago or so. Her new home is just around where I saw you yesterday. Just a bit further down, towards here. She’s also changed her number, but she hasn’t seen you since. Where’s your phone? I’ll save the number on there for you.’

‘What phone?’ asked Eternity.

‘What do you mean what phone?’ said Hannah, taking her phone out of her pocket and shaking it about. ‘One like this?’

‘I don’t have one.’

‘You don’t have one? What you lost it?’ asked Hannah, dropping her phone onto her lap.

‘Yes,’ lied Eternity, her attention drawn to a lone young boy bobbing his head in rhythm to the song being played. ‘Anyway,’ started Eternity, eager to divert Hannah’s attention from the phone issue lest she start enquiring. ‘The mocha is nice.’

‘What?’ sighed Hannah, digging her palms into her seat and slightly elevating her bottom.

‘I want to go home,’ said Eternity. ‘Before it’s too late.’

‘Too late for what?’

‘I feel tired,’ lied Eternity. ‘I better get home.’

‘Ok babe. You go home like an old nana. The chickens haven’t even gone to bed yet.’

‘I’ll go to bed before the chickens,’ laughed Eternity. Hannah did not return her anxious chuckle, instead she gulped the last of her coffee, slid her arm into the handle of her bag, and stood over Eternity.

‘Come on babe, haven’t got all day you know.’

Eternity dangled over her seat’s arm, trying to pick up her coat, and secretly hoping that Hannah would leave without her, as she did not want her to inhale its stench.

Eternity jammed the invitation into her coat’s pocket, slung the it over her forearm, and turned to face Hannah, who was stretching and contracting her fingers repeatedly.

‘You ready now? Shall we get going?’

Eternity nodded.

They exited the warm comforting interior of the shop and was immediately numbed from head to toe by the dull chill of the night.

‘I’m going this way,’ said Hannah, pointing to the opposite direction to which the House was situated.

‘And I’ll go this way,’ said Eternity tilting her head to the right.

‘OK babe,’ said Hannah, leaning in to give Eternity her staple invisible kisses which included yet more gentle brushing of cheeks. Eternity received the brushes with passivity. ‘I’ll see you at Denise’s baby shower then ha? It’s tomorrow. Don’t lose the invitation. We don’t take excuses about how you didn’t come because you’d lost the invitation and didn’t know the day. Also, if you don’t come we’ll need to reconsider our friendship and even possibly consider taking you out of our little circle. Capiisce?’

‘OK,’ said Eternity. ‘I’ll come.’

‘Good,’ said Hannah, swinging around. ‘See you then.’

‘Bye,’ said Eternity.

She watched as Hannah disappeared into the bustling road before she turned around and started her journey towards the House.

CHAPTER 18

The House was shrouded in darkness when she reached it, so much so that if not for the porchlights of the house next door, it would have merged with the black of the night. She must have left the front gate open because it was swinging on its hinges, squeaking as it did so. She carefully made her way towards the front door, staring at her feet all the way, to make sure that she did not trip, or step on anything that would be audible within the house. She lacked the energy to come up with a lie if she woke anybody up. What would she say? That she had met up with someone from the outer world, someone who claimed to be her good friend and had not attempted to harm her in the slightest bit? Plus leaving the House for activities other than emptying the daily food donations into the river was against the rules of the House. How would she justify her actions? What if they decided to exile her from the House? Where would she go? Maybe Hannah would take her in, but she seemed too upfront, too nosey, and came across as someone who felt too highly of herself. Eternity didn't know if she would have liked to stay with her.

As she lifted the flowerpot to the side of the door, it occurred to her that her duty within the House entailed visions from the afterlife and these visions wouldn't be restricted to a specific space, they could pop up anywhere and at anytime. If she got caught she'd just tell them that she was chasing a vision, which had led her down the road and then disappeared without revealing itself. She patted the floor to locate the key. She had started losing all hope and had even started considering what she would do if she was stuck outside in the cold when her hand touched the key which seemed to have slid out from under the pot.

Trying with difficulty to control the movements of her cold-stiff fingers, she opened the door and walked in. The warmth of the house touched her face, and it was only then that she was able to feel each part of her body. Holding the door handle firmly down, she gently closed the door behind her, and stopped to take off her shoes. Clutching her coat close to her chest, she climbed the stairs two at a time. She was halfway along the landing, when she heard a whimper behind her. She froze.

'Hey,' said the voice. Eternity recognized it to be Betty's. She was certain that Betty had not been able to identify her as The Holy One of the House, and so was tempted to turn around, run back down the stairs and out of the door. You had a vision, she thought. If the

situation arises just tell her you had a vision. She would have run back down, if she knew exactly where Betty was standing on the landing, and how much she could see.

‘Hey I said. Who are you? Speak to me. Or...or I’ll kill you.’

‘Betty it’s me,’ whispered Eternity. ‘The Holy One.’

‘My Holy One?’ said Betty with surprise.

Eternity could only make out the outline of Betty’s face. Her features were consumed by the dark.

‘Yes,’ said Eternity, still holding her coat firmly against her chest. ‘I went down... from thirst. I drank a glass of water.’ No, thought Eternity. Tell her about the imaginary vision.

Eternity heard Betty swallow. ‘My Holy One. I told you to let me know if you needed anything. It’s really dark, none of us want anything to happen to you, that’s why we’ve decided it this way.’

‘I promise I will next time,’ said Eternity. ‘I’m really exhausted. Can I go to my room now?’

‘Let me lead you to your room,’ said Betty, taking a step towards Eternity.

‘No,’ said Eternity loudly. ‘It’s OK. I can go myself.’

Betty sniffed. Eternity felt a pang of guilt. Was she crying because of her? Her instinct was telling her to apologise, but her logic was urging her to quickly shut herself in her room before Betty asked anymore questions.

‘Good night,’ she whispered, while rushing away, ignoring Betty’s sniffles.

As soon as she had closed the door, she removed her flannel and blazer and threw them under the bed, then without pulling the duvet back, she let herself fall onto the mattress.

CHAPTER 19

Eternity was grateful that it was the end of an eight hour yoga session. Her whole body ached, but mostly her arms, which felt like they'd been stabbed repeatedly with a blunt knife. 'It's all about the arms. Yoga is all about the arms,' Lettaya had said when they were getting ready to start. She was right, thought Eternity. The arms did indeed find themselves the central body part of each move.

'I'll make sure that everyone's in their rooms, peacefully, of course,' said Betty to Eternity. 'And then I'll check up on you when I'm done.'

The women strolled out, backs hunched, mouths opened, and hair clinging to their foreheads, in clumps from sweat.

'OK. There's really no need. I'll be fine,' said Eternity. She made her way towards the door. 'I'm sure I'll manage to take care of myself.'

Eternity abruptly stopped, her feet squeaking against the marble floor. 'Betty?'

'Yes, my Holy One.'

'What day is it today?'

'It's a Thursday, my Holy One.'

'The date?'

'Oh, I think it's the nineteenth my Holy One. In fact, I'm pretty sure.'

Eternity quickened her pace, walked out of the auburn door, in through the front door, climbed the stairs (two at a time) and entered her room. She had to prepare for her meeting with Hannah and her friends.

As soon as she was in her room, she dived under the bed and retrieved the black blazer and the red flannel she had worn at her meeting with Hannah. She realized that she was in a much more cheerful mood than she expected, considering the circumstances; that she had to once more make sure that everyone had tucked themselves into bed, and was sleeping or near enough unconscious, before she slowly made her way down the stairs, and out of the door into the outer world, so different than the inner one she was bound to by duty.

She knew that Betty would come knocking on her door, even though she had insisted that there was no need for her to do so, as she was capable of putting herself to bed, thank you. And, she was absolutely right in her thinking as in only a few seconds came a timid knock at the door. Eternity jammed the blazer and the flannel under her pillow, making sure that they were properly concealed, by tucking any spillages with rapid punches.

‘Come in,’ she said.

‘Hi, my Holy One,’ said Betty.

‘Betty?’ said Eternity. ‘Can you bring me something that will show me the time?’

‘What are you going to do with it, my Holy One?’ asked Betty. ‘I can tell you the time whenever you ask. Don’t I help you enough my Holy One?’

‘You do of course,’ said Eternity, hesitating as she noticed the red domed-hat she had worn the previous day, sitting on the floor on the other side of the wardrobe. She was sure she had placed it in the wardrobe before she had set off into the outer world the previous day. ‘But, I’d like to...be more independent. Maybe it’d all come back to me quicker like that. If I could just think for myself.’

‘But...’

Before Betty had a chance to argue, Eternity added: ‘And you’ve got so much to do. You’ve got to look after the others and then me as well. It’s not fair on you.’

‘But I don’t mind my Holy One,’ said Betty. ‘It’s a pleasure.’

‘But I really want one,’ said Eternity. ‘And if you can bring it right now, I’d be happy.’

‘But...’

‘Please,’ begged Eternity.

‘OK, my Holy One,’ said Betty. ‘I’ll be right back.’ She pulled the door gently behind her, and Eternity could hear her footsteps, forceful and confident, fade in the direction of her room.

In a mere few minutes, during which Eternity had not moved at all, she heard Betty’s footsteps near her room. Betty opened the door without knocking this time. She was holding a small pink plastic clock.

‘I’ll just leave it here,’ said Betty. She placed the clock on the table and exited the room.

‘Betty,’ called Eternity. ‘I didn’t mean to offend. I appreciate your help, but you need to understand. I’d like to think for myself sometimes.’

‘If you say so my Holy One. The funeral’s tomorrow. I just thought you should keep it in mind’, said Betty, closing the door.

Eternity pulled the clothes out from under the pillow and spread them out on the bed to relieve them of their creases. Then, she walked over to the table, twisted the clock around so it was facing her and sat back on her bed again.

It was three thirty. She had another two hours or so before she made her way out the front door into the outer world. Eternity lifted the coat from the foot of the bed and pulled the book out of the pocket, along with the pen. She flicked the pages, glancing at what she’d already written over the past few days. When she got to the fifth page, she pressed down the centre of the book to keep the spine open and wrote: *I remember the suitcase. I used it once. But only certain things about it are present in my memory. These hands that I am writing with stuffing a lot of clothes into it, while drops of water fall onto them from somewhere above, two or three at a time.*

Eternity looked up at the clock. There was still one hour and fifty minutes till she had to leave. She placed her book and the pen between her mattress and the wooden bed frame, hung the blazer and the flannel in the wardrobe, tucked herself into bed, and decided to have a nap to help time pass quicker.

CHAPTER 20

Eternity ran the no. 6 buzzer just below the grey marble sign with bold gold writing that read Violet House. She was glad to have finally made it after she had turned into two pitch-black roads that were just empty fields with no buildings around. Plus, she'd been freaked out by a black cat whose body was invisible in the dark, its yellow eyes seemingly floating in mid-air.

She was just about to re-buzz when the door was opened by a tall lady, with plump lips that sat laboriously on the lower half of her face, as if they'd been borrowed from someone else. It didn't take long for Eternity to notice the small belly that protruded from under her small breasts. The woman standing in front of Eternity (whom she suspected was Denise) extended her hand, that was tightly clutching a tall glass of something bubbly, over Eternity's shoulder and gave her imaginary kisses on both her cheeks.

'Where on earth have you been?' she asked Eternity, pausing after every word as if every syllable was a burden. The strong stench of alcohol escaping from Denise's mouth caused Eternity to forget the question that she had been asked. It brought back memories of sickening headaches and a queasy stomach. 'Huh?' exasperated Denise, when Eternity did not deliver an answer.

Eternity gazed down and found herself unable to make eye contact with Denise. Firstly, because she was trying to avoid the toxic scent of alcohol from entering her system and secondly...she couldn't quite place a finger on what the second reason was. Did she feel threatened of being interrogated in such a way? Denise was at least a head taller than Eternity. Did she feel threatened of being looked down on?

'What was the question?' asked Eternity, eagerly attempting to suppress the shakiness in her voice.

'You're not paying attention as usual,' said Denise, holding her cup close to her chest. 'I said, where were you? You're late,' she tapped onto her silver watch with the bottom of her glass. 'We've been waiting. You know how many bottles we've drunk since...what was it...I think six.'

'I don't know,' said Eternity. 'It's cold. Can I come in?' Denise was wearing a red nightdress which billowed at her hips. 'You must be cold too,' she said.

‘Alcohol is the boss,’ said Denise, ‘perfect on a cold day. You’ll never feel cold, even if its minus forty thousand degrees.’

Eternity walked into the building and waited for Denise to lock the door. After she had done so, Denise took a sip of her drink, puckered her lips and said: ‘Come on, up you go my darling.’

Eternity moved to one side of the stairs to make way for Denise to take the lead.

‘You go up first, I’ll follow,’ said Eternity.

‘OK then.’ Denise tutted. ‘Move out of the way, make room for the pregnant. Hold this, my knickers are falling down,’ she said, giving Eternity the glass which was now empty.

Eternity took the glass and watched as Denise tugged at her knickers, pulling them up to the centre of her belly. The skin on her large belly was shiny and smooth.

She followed Denise who dawdled up the stairs, tipping from left to right. They ascended two flights of stairs and stopped on the third landing in front of a door that was slightly ajar. Till now, everything had proceeded perfectly; Denise had not understood that Eternity had no idea who she was. It occurred to her that Denise was overly intimate with her, expressing small hints within her speech that she knew her closely. ‘You’re not paying attention as always,’ was a hint. This meant that she had not paid close attention in the past, and several times too as the ‘always’ suggested. She was tempted to ask Denise where their acquaintance had started and how close of a relationship they had, but she decided against it. She was doing so well with keeping up appearances. Through observations and certain remarks, she would figure it out soon anyway.

Denise kicked the door in, it bounced back and was about to shut on them, when she pushed it back with the tips of her fingers.

‘You know it’s a no shoes house,’ said Denise, pushing Eternity back with her palm, as she was about to step onto the rug in the centre of the hallway.

Eternity hesitated and took a step back. ‘Oh yes, I forgot,’ she said. ‘What is it that you want me to wear?’

‘Slippers,’ said Denise, gesturing towards the area behind the door with her head.

Eternity walked over to the door and gazed down at the slippers. There were several pairs, all different sizes, but identical in design with the ones that Denise was wearing; purple with yellow flowers. She gave the glass to Denise, pulled off her shoes without any struggle, placed them neatly next to the slippers, then slid her feet into the biggest pair. They were still a

tiny bit small but were so much more comfortable than the random pair of shoes that she had grabbed from the House.

‘Come on girl,’ said Denise, pulling at her arm. ‘Hurry up. Putting on a pair of slippers isn’t rocket science. The girls will be so happy to see you. They’re in the kitchen.’

Eternity allowed herself to be pulled along. They walked down a dark narrow corridor and Eternity was disappointed that she couldn’t see anything. Occasionally she would feel her feet hitting random objects that were scattered all over the floor.

‘What’s all this on the floor?’ she asked Denise.

‘I don’t know babe,’ said Denise, ‘it can be anything really. You know how I am. I detest cleaning. I’d rather slit my wrists.’

‘How can you see where we’re going?’ asked Eternity, staring into the darkness.

‘I can’t.’

Straight ahead of them Eternity could see a thin white light near the floor. As they got closer, she realized that the light was seeping out from under a door that was closed.

‘Here we are,’ said Denise, her index finger and thumb firmly encircling Eternity’s wrist. There were three women inside. One was Hannah. She was wearing the long baggy cardigan that Eternity had seen her with a couple of days ago, puffing on a cigarette and lifting her head up frequently to blow out the smoke. The smell reminded her of coughing till your throat hurt days on end. Eternity had not seen the other two women. When they laid eyes on her, they both dropped their glasses onto the kitchen counter and strode over towards her from different angles. They both said hello, and she was first hugged by one then the other.

‘We’ve been waiting for you,’ said the girls together. They had the same beady eyes and large hooked nose. In fact, only their hair styles were different; while one had gathered her hair at the top of her head in a messy bun, the other had left her long wavy hair drop down over her shoulders, past her waist.

‘Sorry,’ said Eternity, once more trying to control the shakiness of her voice. ‘I got lost. You know how it is, with it all being dark.’

The girls nodded. Hannah had switched the stove on and was lighting a new cigarette.

‘Hi Hannah,’ said Eternity. ‘It’s nice to see you again.’

‘Aha. Good to see you to,’ said Hannah, her face turned away from Eternity. Eternity watched as she switched off the stove and took another puff at her cigarette.

An awkward silence settled over the room. Eternity's attention was drawn to the tall glass bottles filled with colourful liquid aligned one next to the other on the counter.

'How's life treating you?' asked the girl with the messy bun.

Eternity diverted her eyes from the bottles and turned towards the girl, who was rotating a glass within her grip.

'Good. Very good,' said Eternity absentmindedly.

'Good,' said the girl puffing. Why was she puffing? Have I bored her? thought Eternity.

Denise who had now seated herself at the kitchen table was rubbing her belly in rotating movements. 'We should do some catching up and all, since we haven't seen each other for a long time,' she said.

Hannah coughed, patted her chest, and then puffed at her cigarette.

'Would you like me to show you my Johnny's room?' asked Denise, her left hand tucked into the curve of her spine while the other rested on her tummy. 'I call him Johnny for now because I'm not sure what to name him, but it definitely won't be Johnny.'

Denise grabbed Eternity's wrist again, and she let Denise lead her out of the kitchen into the dark again. As they walked she heard the squeak of a door before they abruptly stopped. Eternity accidentally stepped on the back of Denise's slipper, causing her to lose her stability.

'Sorry,' whispered Eternity.

'It's OK,' said Denise aggressively.

The only light came from a fluorescent toy which shone in the far right of the room. It had a bald, horizontally elongated head, and was wearing a scarlet top with a black and golden symbol on its left, shaped like an upside down bold V. There was an eerie darkness below the feet of the toy. The floor felt soft under the soles of her slippers.

'I want my son to experience the same passions that we had when we were kids. They should know what Star Trek is and fall in love with it. That's Johnny's over there,' said Denise, pointing at the toy. 'Isn't it sweet. Look at that bald head,' said Denise, clapping her hands together after every sentence.

'It's cool I guess. Never been a fan of Star Trek myself you know,' said Hannah from behind Eternity, who from the shock of not expecting someone else to have followed them, grabbed onto Denise's nightdress. 'The inside of the ship always reminds me of an 80s living room and then that reminds me of my mother and you know how I don't really want to be reminded of her.'

‘Hey, you’re going rip my dress up into pieces,’ said Denise. ‘Trust me you wouldn’t want that to happen, not with the state my body’s in.’

‘Why don’t we just put the light on? We might trip or something. I really don’t want to break anything.’

‘It’s bad luck,’ said Hannah and Denise both at once, a tinge of annoyance evident in their voices.

‘Come on girl. Gather your senses. You know its bad luck to open the light in the room of an unborn baby. It may lead to miscarriage. Eyes...the act of seeing can curse, especially envious eyes and we all know that each and every one of us can carry a little bit of envy inside of us, even if we don’t want to accept it. Think of Medusa, turning everybody into stone with a single look. Think of it as something like that.’

‘I guess,’ said Eternity quietly, trying to remember if she knew a Medusa and understand how it was that she could turn people into stone.

They exited the room they were in and entered another through a navy shiny curtain.

Sitting on a low black leather ottoman, near the back wall was an overweight middle-aged man. His feet were crossed under him and he was completely naked above the waist. Two plump breasts drooped over his ball-like belly, the nipples barely visible as they were tucked into the rolls of fat that formed his mid-section. He had a beauty spot in between his two messy eyebrows. There was not a neck in sight on his round body, his head seeming to have been placed directly onto the centre of his shoulder blades. His earlobes were large, so much so that they touched his shoulders. They swayed back and forth as he chuckled for no reason whatsoever. Eternity wasn’t sure if he could actually see them, since his eyes were almost invisible because of his puffy cheeks. On the bottom half of his body he wore a turquoise silky trouser with red and yellow flowers printed all over it.

‘Mr. Ahdub, how have you been? I haven’t had the chance to pop by for quite a while. Denise told me that you had quite the fever for a few days last week. But you seem as jolly as ever, I see,’ said Hannah.

Mr Ahdub picked up the white mug which sat on the green coffee table in front of him, took a large sip, and then cleared his throat. The noise of mucus disentangling from the walls of his throat nauseated Eternity.

‘I’m fine now, my fine lady. Only God can take away the life that he gives. So, if I was to ever abandon this world it would be because of his own precious will,’ said Mr Ahdub, his voice echoing as if he was speaking into an empty barrel.

‘I am glad you’re good now Mr. Ahdub,’ said Hannah, giving Denise an uncomfortable glare.

‘Is that Ethan with you my dears? I haven’t seen her in such a long time. I’ve truly missed her ever so very much.’

Eternity, forgetting that her real name was Ethan, expected the twins to come forth and say hello to the eccentric man, but when she looked behind her she realized that there was no sign of the two girls.

‘What are you looking behind you for Ethan...my fine lady?’ said Mr. Ahdub.

Is he speaking to me? thought Eternity.

‘Me?’ said Eternity. ‘I was just expecting Ethan to say hello to you.’

Mr. Ahdub let out a sincere chuckle, patting down on his round belly. ‘She’s funny, isn’t she? You’ve always been the funny one. That’s why I love you so much,’ he said.

Denise and Hannah were staring at each other; an identical unamused expression on each one’s face. Denise looked intently into Hannah’s eyes and shook her head and Eternity watched as Hannah sucked her lips into her mouth and puffed out her cheeks.

‘I’ve always loved you more than I’ve ever loved my Denise here,’ said Mr. Ahdub, nodding towards Hannah. ‘My Hannah here knows that too, do you not my fair girl?’

Hannah nodded, slowly allowed her lips to re-emerge and said: ‘You never fail to mention it.’ She lifted her eyebrows and stared at Denise again, who responded by once more shaking her head.

‘We’re going now Dad. Claire and Bianca are waiting in the kitchen.’

‘Of course, you may go my fair ladies. I’ll just continue being the old man that I am, sitting here sipping on my coffee,’ he said, raising his hand and glancing at them calmly.

In the kitchen, either Claire or Bianca, was standing in front of the kitchen counter, mixing something that Eternity could not see from where she was standing.

‘How’s your dad?’ she asked, without turning around.

‘Same as usual Claire,’ said Denise, ‘I don’t think his mind is all there. He’s losing it a bit more every day.’

Claire abruptly swung around, her bun tilting from side to side. When she was merely a few centimetres away from banging into Eternity she stopped, smiled and then extended the glass which had a light orange liquid in it.

‘Take it. I made it for you. It’s nothing strong, just vodka and orange.’ Eternity couldn’t help staring at Claire’s two crooked front teeth, a dark yellow line ran in between them. She took the glass. ‘Your dad was always like that,’ Claire said to Denise. ‘He always gave me the creeps. That’s why I never go to see him. He says all these weird things and I never know what to say. You know how I am. I feel bad for days if I feel like I’ve said something wrong.’

‘I don’t think he’d remember if you said anything wrong anyway,’ said Denise. ‘He’s always got this smile on his face, like he only has happy pictures in his brain.’

Bianca walked into the room. She opened the cupboard above the sink and pulled out a tall crystal glass with six sticks mounted with chocolate covered marshmallows. Each had a small blue or pink ribbon wrapped around the bottom.

‘At least he’s happy,’ Claire said.

‘I guess you have a point,’ said Denise, while picking out a marshmallow stick that Bianca offered her. She bit into it and several pieces of the chocolate coating fell to the ground. ‘Being happy is better than those mardy old folks you have to cope with sometimes. Nothing makes them happy. It’s just that it’s hard living with him, especially with the baby coming.’

‘You should always make sure to pick the biggest piece of food, especially when it’s free,’ said Hannah, ‘I mean come on, look at that chocolate on this one. It’s triple times thicker than on the other ones.’

Eternity watched as she plunged it all into her mouth, sucking the marshmallows off the stick all in one go. When she pulled the wooden stick out of her mouth, there was nothing left, but a single streak of saliva which extended from the stick to her mouth.

Suddenly, Mr. Ahdub entered the room wearing a grey shiny suit and an old pair of slippers. He was holding a carrot in his hand. Two withered leaves dangled on either side of his middle finger, giving his finger two clumps of green hair.

‘Dad. Please go back into your room,’ begged Denise.

Eternity stared at the single sapphire stone on Mr Ahdub’s shoulder. She couldn’t tell if it was part of his shirt, or if it was a brooch that he had pinned on. When he bowed to greet the

twins, she realised that the sapphire stone was part of the silver dangly earrings which were pulling down on his earlobes. The twins took a few steps towards him and returned the bow. Denise's eyes were bulging with thin veins. She was brutally chewing on her lips.

The two girls each grabbed one of his hands and held it within their palms.

'Mr Ahdub. I would have loved to stay here, in this town, where I can make use of your knowledge about us and our future. But I've made a few plans to start a spa business in the south coast of England. Though, I don't know exactly where yet. Also, I want to find someone that I can settle down with, maybe have a few kids. Though, I don't know who this might be yet. And I want to help others. I feel like time is speeding up for me and that I won't be able to achieve all that I want to. My female body might not allow me to have as much children as I want. So, I must take action now. At least to achieve some of the things I want too,' said Claire, her pink cheeks rising and falling as she spoke.

Mr. Ahdub stared at Claire for a few seconds, then he squinted and extended his lips into a wrinkly O.

'You may be able to achieve your dreams. And to make them come true it's important to have money, so I approve of the spa job. You go and get that business of yours started. When it comes to marrying, first you must reach the ability to tell the difference between a husband and a man. A husband is forever. While a man can disappear in the blink of an eye. If you marry without thinking, you might not have the chance to marry again. It might not last, if you marry now. The best time is later. And before you can help others, you must be able to help yourself. Now you are at the stage of your life where you think the world revolves around you. If I was to describe you in one word, I would say that you are an egoist. That will never change of you, but you can learn to use it for a good cause. It is only then that you may be able to help others,' said the man, pulling his hand away from Claire's and placing the carrot into this shirt pocket.

It didn't take him long to pull the carrot out of his pocket and start munching on it. spurts of light orange juice escaped his mouth as he chewed, slivering down his lips.

Was this a joke? Eternity asked herself. Claire had stated, no more than a few minutes ago, that she found Mr. Ahdub to be a creepy old man who said the weirdest things. And, now she was asking for advice and carefully listening to every word that he uttered. In fact, she was standing so close to him that Eternity could clearly imagine her being sucked into Mr. Ahdub's mouth, disappearing in one big gulp. Surely, this would make Claire the happiest girl in the world at that very moment.

After there was nothing left of the carrot apart from two withered green leaves, which he left on the kitchen counter, Mr. Ahdub stood up and without saying a single word, he strolled past them and left, closing the door gently behind him. Claire and Bianca picked up one leaf each, gave them a soft peck and placed them into their bosoms.

The room was uncomfortably silent. Eternity did not dare look at anyone, because she was not entirely sure what had happened and how Denise, who obviously did not approve of her father's actions, would handle the situation.

'What the fuck, Claire and Bianca?' hissed Denise, breaking the silence. 'What the fuck?'

Denise's face was flushed. She pinched the loose fabric of her nightdress around her chest and tightened it; her tiny nipples stood out like shrivelled sultanas.

'We don't know what happens to us when we see your dad,' said Claire, staring down at her shoes.

'Something else that's not from this world, some sort of power overtakes us, and we just can't help but be drawn to him. You don't believe us, but that's the truth,' said Bianca bluntly.

Hannah who was sitting on one of the red folding chairs around the table, seemingly following the conversation with interest, muttered 'bullshit' under her breath.

'It's not bullshit,' moaned Bianca.

'How comes it never happens to us then?' said Hannah, tapping the bare stick which she had eaten the marshmallows off from, onto the edge of the kitchen table.

'Maybe he does it on purpose,' said Bianca.

'Maybe he does something...spiritual or something to attract us to him this way.'

Denise snorted. 'I don't think even you believe what you're saying,' she said. 'Anyway, I don't want to dwell on these sorts of things on this special day of mine,' she caressed her belly. 'The doctor said I need to stay away from anything negative. Stress, anger, irritable friends.'

Claire tossed her head back and sighed.

'Shall we play Celebri-baby now and then we'll cut the cake. Or not. I could in fairness eat it all myself. It's not like I could get any fatter.'

Eternity was dying to go to the bathroom. She crisscrossed her legs and tried to divert her attention from her bladder by thinking of how she could engage in the unpleasant conversation that was unravelling in the kitchen. When she could hold it no longer, she said:

‘May I go to the bathroom? You don’t need to wait for me. I’ll join in when I get back.’

‘Go down the corridor, there’s some stairs just opposite the front door, go up them. It’s not the door opposite you, but the one next to that,’ said Denise, tiptoeing to reach the box on the second shelf of the cupboard above the sink. She was having difficulty reaching it because her belly was bouncing back off the kitchen counter, preventing her from standing close.

Eternity had barely made her way halfway down the short corridor when she realised that the girls were whispering. What was the need for all this whispering? She placed her back against the wall and slid across towards the kitchen. She hid herself behind the wooden frame of the kitchen door and listened.

‘...consider your behaviour when she’s around,’ said Denise.

‘I can’t help it,’ said Hannah, ‘I’m trying my best. It’s not easy you know. Especially after what happened. And after all that, now I have to behave like she’s my best friend and that I love her so much.’

‘That’s not what I’m saying. You can at least try and be neutral. Erase that constant frown you’ve got on your face.’

‘She’s never going to come back if you don’t. You know right?’ said Denise.

There was silence. Eternity imagined Hannah nodding. Were they talking about her? There was no guarantee that it was herself that they were referring to. But, she was dying to learn if she was the person that Hannah had to force herself to be jolly around. In fairness, Hannah was possibly the grumpiest person she had ever met, even the women in the House who’d experienced the death of their children, and almost lost all hope in life weren’t as miserable as she was.

Eternity could hear the rustling of paper. She took a step into the kitchen and awkwardly said: ‘Hi.’

All the girls looked up at her.

‘That was quick,’ said Denise.

‘I’m very quick at...weeing,’ said Eternity, her bladder still on the verge of explosion.

‘That’s good to hear,’ said Hannah, smiling. Was it a forced smile? thought Eternity. She had never seen Hannah smile before, so she had no reference point.

There was a poster hanging up on the wall near the table, with several different babies. Their smiles were identical; sincere and radiant, as if they had never experienced any mishaps in life before. There was a pile of rectangular cards in the centre of the table.

‘Oh babe,’ said Hannah, picking up a flat phone from the table, and extending it to Eternity. ‘We’ve decided to give you this. You know to keep in contact and all that?’

Eternity moved her head like a surprised pigeon trying to look at the phone from all angles. ‘Thank you,’ she said.

‘It’s my old one,’ said Denise, ‘but you can have it till you replace it. We’re scared you’re never gonna buy your own, and then we’re never gonna hear from you again. You’ve got no excuses now.’

Eternity took the phone from Hannah and twirled it amongst her fingers. There were a few deep scratches on the screen, with a small crack in the top right corner.

‘You gonna be able to use it?’

Eternity pushed down the button on the side of the phone. The screen lit up, then she pressed on the small lock symbol and flicked it aside to reach the homepage. She didn’t know how this was possible, but she remembered using such a device before. The tapping of the small yellow envelope that opened the messages box which was empty all came naturally to her.

‘I’ll be OK,’ she said.

‘I’ve put my old sim in there for you. And one last thing. It’ll vibrate when someone’s calling. OK?’ said Denise, moving the cards to the centre of the table.

‘Yes.’

‘OK then shall we start playing now? We’ll go clockwise,’ said Denise, ‘So, Hannah goes first.’ She looked up at Eternity, who was standing behind Claire. ‘You can get that chair over there,’ she said, pointing at the navy desk chair next to the kitchen door.

Eternity slid the phone into her trouser pocket, dragged the chair across, and sat between Bianca and Denise. Hannah had already drawn a card and was crushing it with her fingers from both sides. She shoved it in everybody’s face.

‘What do you think?’ she said.

It was a photo of a sickly thin woman, with long exhausted hair parted in the centre. Her sea blue eyes sat under an unnerving emptiness where her eyebrows should have been.

‘Is that Gwyneth Paltrow?’ asked Claire, ‘I mean she’s aged, hasn’t she?’

‘It’s all the health foods she’s eating,’ said Bianca.

‘Yeah, but I thought always eating at Wholefoods was supposed to keep you young?’

‘Well, it hasn’t worked on her has it?’

Eternity had no idea what they were talking about.

‘Shhh,’ hissed Denise, ‘I’m trying to concentrate here.’ She glared at the photo and then gazed at the poster with the children. ‘I think her child’s B.’

Eternity looked at the child under the letter B written in bold black. It was of an adorable little girl, with straight blonde hair falling over her forehead. She was sucking on her thumb, her round blue eyes droopy with fatigue.

‘I think its C,’ said Bianca.

‘I agree,’ said Claire.

Eternity didn’t know which baby belonged to this person who had a funny name she’d never heard of before. She twisted in her chair then stopped and stared out of the window, at the street that was illuminated with the lights of the passing cars.

Suddenly, she saw someone on the street below wearing a pair of blue baggy trousers with floral imprints. She noticed a shiny bald head and two ear lobes that swung forwards and backwards. It was Mr. Ahdub. His flabby belly bobbed up and down as he walked. Eternity was mesmerized by the way he crossed the road, which was quiet and creepy when she had first entered it but was now crammed with cars. He swerved through the traffic, not in the nervous, tense way most people do, when they are stranded amongst cars which are capable of taking ones lives with a single hit, but as if he could control the movements of the drivers, completely aware that he was invincible amongst the cars.

‘Babe can you pay attention and join in?’ said Denise, placing her palm over Eternity’s hand.

‘Oh...Sorry...’ said Eternity, ‘Who’s the next baby? It’s just that I’m having trouble remembering who is who. Not good at remembering faces.’

‘You’re better at weeing,’ smirked Hannah.

Eternity looked back at the road. There was no sign of Mr. Ahdub. Just cars whizzing from left to right and right to left.

She suddenly felt dazed as if something from within her had ascended and left her body sitting on the desk chair in the kitchen. She looked at the girl’s around the table, their mouths were moving, and Claire was laughing, but she couldn’t hear anything. Then, just as she felt that she was going to be incapable of controlling her body which was sliding off the chair, all

the noises came back to her in a deafening wave. She slapped her palms over her ears and held them down.

There was a lengthy silence, as all the girl's stared at her in shock. Nobody moved. Nobody breathed. Only Eternity in shallow pants.

'You OK?' said Denise after a while, tugging at Eternity's arm.

Eternity let her body relax and dropped her arms onto her lap. Claire was humming. She stopped and leaned in closer to Hannah. Eternity heard her whisper: 'I'm scared. Is she OK?'

Eternity stood up abruptly.

'I better go,' she said, not looking at anyone in particular.

'Maybe you should stay here tonight,' said Denise. She took Eternity's hand in her own. 'You're cold.'

'No,' said Eternity harshly. 'I'll go now. I'll come back another day.'

She snatched her hand out of Denise's grip, ran through the short corridor, out of the door, down the stairs and rushed out into the frosty night.

She ran into the road amongst the cars, which did not stop politely as they had done when Mr. Ahdub was crossing the same road, but beeped harshly at her.

'You better come back sooner than later,' shouted Denise from the kitchen window. 'We like your company.'

Eternity continued running, the phone bouncing in her pocket. She was in front of the House in no more than ten minutes.

CHAPTER 21

‘Giovanna Linetti. I think that was Chiara’s real name. To be honest, I’m not even sure what my own name is, having not used it in a long time,’ said Betty to Eternity. She was wearing a smart red overcoat, the same one that she had forced Eternity to wear earlier in the morning, despite Eternity’s insistence that it was too warm in the house for such a thick piece of clothing. Eternity had worn it until the trickles of sweat that had formed on her forehead had convinced Betty to allow her to remove it a few minutes later. They were in the Funeral Room together preparing for the funeral that was going to take place in exactly four hours and seventeen minutes.

Eternity had woken up by herself in the morning, because of a numbing pain in her thigh which she later realised was caused by the phone that she had forgotten in her pocket. She was glad that she wasn’t going to burden Betty this time, with all the incessant nudging and ranting she had had to do the day before. She had taken her blazer and flannel off when she had gotten home and stuffed it back into the suitcase, before wearing her yoga t-shirt and jumper and sliding into bed.

An array of noises filled the house even before the sun had risen, and she guessed that the inhabitants of the House were preparing for the funeral. She had grabbed the door handle and was about to push it down to leave her room when in stepped Betty.

‘It’s the funeral today,’ said Eternity

‘Yes, my Holy One. It is,’ said Betty.

‘I want to help,’ said Eternity.

‘Of course, you can,’ said Betty.

They walked downstairs together, Betty forcing Eternity to wear a red overcoat that she claimed needed to be worn at the funeral for presentation. On the other hand, Eternity assured Betty that she’d wear the coat later when the funeral had actually started.

‘What are we going to do with Chiara’s body?’ asked Eternity, rubbing her eyes aggressively.

‘Bury her in the shed, my Holy One. That’s where Rina’s is.’

‘In the shed?’ asked Eternity, listening to the rain patter against the window.

‘Yes, my Holy One’ said Betty. ‘What else would we do with it? This is our only space in this world. Betty tucked her hair behind her ear and continued: ‘The police came around my

Holy One, asking if we'd been carrying anything illegal. The neighbours must have been suspicious of something. We did make it a bit obvious I guess carrying something from down the river with a wheelbarrow. We told them no and they left my Holy One. They may be back though, so make sure you just remain silent. Make out that you don't know what they're talking about.'

Eternity nodded.

'There's no way they'll guess that we were carrying a dead body around my Holy One. We covered it with garden stuff, maybe they thought we were pulling the daffodils out from down the river.' She scratched at her cheek and said: 'A funeral isn't a funeral without you my Holy One. You'll need to carry out certain steps to free the soul today. If you don't it gets stuck in this in between place, that is certainly not good for the soul. There's nothing worse than being trapped.'

Eternity was unpacking the multipack of napkins, shaping them into a cylindrical shape as Betty had shown her and ensuring that they held their shapes with the help of a red ribbon that she tied into a bow.

'Anyway,' continued Betty, 'she fought with her parents a lot. I mean her parents came to the house a couple of times and tried to take her away. She would try to explain to them every time that staying here was a good thing for her, that it helped her carry on, that if she left she'd kill herself. But they never listened. In the end, she kept sending someone else to shoo them away, they stopped coming.' Betty pushed back her wavy hair with a single flick of both hands. 'I wasn't that close to her. To be honest, I don't think anyone is close to one another here. It almost feels like we rely on each other's pains to make our own pain easier. Like knowing that someone else has been through the same horrible experience makes your pain more bearable. You know what I mean?'

Betty picked up a plastic chair from the tall pile of chairs next to the door and dropped it next to the other chairs she had arranged into a circle.

'Anyway, don't get me wrong my Holy One, we do speak about our pasts, the memories of before we ended up here, and we do reminiscence about all the good and bad memories we've had, but not regularly. Her mother, Chiara's I mean, wanted her to study accounting at university in the same city that they used to live in. But, she always wanted to live away from her parents. She told me that she had been dreaming of growing up and having a life without them since the age of nine, when she had witnessed her father pulling a knife on her mother.

She was angry at her mother because she continued to stay with him, even though he had gone as far as threatening her with death. She always said that if she had been in that situation, she would never have put up with it, never have stayed with the beast and put her daughter's life in danger too. Her mum apparently always forgave him, like pulling a knife on the woman you sleep in the same bed with, who has given birth to your children, was the most normal thing in life.'

Eternity gathered all the napkins that she had wrapped up and started placing one on each chair.

'When did she finally run away?' asked Eternity.

'I think she moved out with her partner when she wasn't even sixteen yet. Her father was a salesman I think, if I remember correctly he sold rugs and cups and plates and all that. Chiara always used to say that the reason why her parents wanted her to do accounting was because they saw everything as marketable. Even her. They would have married her to someone in the neighbourhood eventually, if she hadn't moved out. Probably to someone who ticked all the bullet points on their list of types of men to marry. Someone handsome and definitely wealthy. She would have had no say in the matter.'

Eternity was now helping Betty with the chairs, widening and narrowing the circle until Betty was pleased.

'Why are there so many chairs left over?' asked Eternity, gesturing towards the huge stack of chairs.

'We used to be a lot more before, and then some people started leaving. Some did join us newly, but we never managed to reach the number we were five or six years ago. And then some die... Sorry if I'm boring you,' said Betty, striding from one side of the room to the other aimlessly. 'It's just that we get used to each other here, and it's so hard when something bad happens to somebody and then they're just gone forever. Repeating the things that we did together or the things that they told me makes me feel a bit better. Because it feels like if I forget a single detail about them, their memories will completely disintegrate, like they've never existed.'

Eternity stood in the middle of the room, observing whether she had managed to place the napkins neatly on each chair. The room was warming up as the rays of the afternoon sun pierced through the drooped corner of the thick black blanket that was nailed to the window in

place of a curtain. Eternity spotted that a single drop of sweat was hanging off the tip of Betty's nose. She watched as it fell onto the plastic chair.

'I think we did a good job together. Although I'm sure the Blessed Coordinator is sure to find some fault in our arrangement, as she always does. You see that napkin on that chair over there, she'll probably say that it's a bit too much to the left. She'll find something.'

'Betty?' started Eternity. 'You're sweating. Maybe you should take your coat off.'

'No, my Holy One. In fact, you should put yours on too. We need to be presentable for the ceremony.'

'Isn't there a thinner piece of clothing that will make us look as equally presentable?' said Eternity, biting on her nail.

'No, my Holy One. Coats are what we've always worn at funerals. It's important we wear it.'

She picked up her coat that was hanging on one of the dining table chairs and wore it.

'My parents were Jehovah Witnesses my Holy one,' said Betty, who had seated herself on one of the chairs and was fanning herself with her hand. 'We were dressed up every day of the week. Long flowing dresses and heels with white shirts. The men wore a suit all the time. We were three sisters and our parents expected us to go around the neighbourhood and talk to people about the sacredness of our God. I was the middle daughter. My parents never came along with us. They just waited for us somewhere nearby. I always felt as if they didn't consider themselves pure and innocent enough to do what our religion required.'

Betty flicked at her cuticles and continued: 'They did always fear God though. I think it was death that they were scared of most, that's why they looked up to God the way they did and wanted us to follow the faith. To save us from this fear of death. Because if you believed in God, then you kind of automatically believed that you were going to go to some place better when you passed away.'

Betty's monologue was cut short by a knock on the door.

'Are you done Betty?' said a voice from behind them. 'Oh look and the Holy One is here too.' It was Lettaya.

'We are most certainly done, Blessed Coordinator,' said Betty, rising from the chair. 'It took us a while, but we got there in the end, right my Holy One? I think everything is perfect.'

Betty pressed her arms firmly to her sides and bit down on her flaky lips.

There was another knock at the door and Keira's head appeared through the gap.

‘Are we ready yet?’ she asked. ‘It’s almost noon. I can make the announcement if you like.’

Betty sighed and shook her head. ‘You know that’s my duty,’ she said. ‘When I feel we’re ready I’ll make the announcement.’

Keira tutted. ‘I didn’t mean to offend you, you know. I was just trying to be of some help.’

‘Well you did,’ said Betty. ‘Go and do your own stuff.’

‘What clean out the shed again? I’ve done that so many times this week,’ said Keira, pushing in the door and stepping into the room.

‘That’s enough ladies,’ said Lettaya. ‘Grow up a little and don’t dare ruin this special day.’

Betty and Keira cast each other menacing looks and sulked like children arguing over the same toy.

Lettaya broke the silence by clapping. ‘Everything looks perfect to me ladies,’ she said. ‘We’re only missing a photo of Chiara, framed if possible, then we can make the announcement and have the funeral begin.’

‘I’ll find the photo,’ snapped Keira.

‘No, I’ve already got one ready,’ said Betty, clenching her teeth so firmly that Eternity was certain they would crack and fly across the room in all directions.

‘You can both do it together,’ said Lettaya, her eyes flittering from Betty to Keira.

Betty and Keira strolled out together, their hips bashing into one another, purposefully thought Eternity, to slow the other down.

‘Oh yes, I almost forgot,’ said Lettaya. She rushed to the door and shouted. ‘Don’t forget the boiled egg and knife girls. We can’t have a funeral without them.’

Suddenly, Eternity felt a tingling on her right thigh. It took her a few seconds to realise that it was the phone that Denise had given her the previous night. Denise had warned her that it would vibrate when they were trying to contact her. She couldn’t possibly pick up the phone with Lettaya in the room.

‘I think I need the toilet,’ said Eternity.

‘You think?’ Lettaya looked at her with astonishment. ‘Go. Go.’ She moved her hands as if she was a shepherd herding her sheep.

Eternity rushed out, and increased her speed about halfway to the bathroom, when she heard footsteps and ragged breathing from behind her.

‘The Holy One,’ managed Lettaya, amongst painful rasps, as she tried to catch her breath.

Eternity stopped and turned around. The phone was still vibrating in her pocket. Lettaya’s eyes were moist and bright. She was smiling, or Eternity thought that she was, as her face was contorted into a form that Eternity had never seen on her before. Her cheeks puffed, like a squirrel who had excessively filled his cheeks with nuts.

‘You said that you thought you were going to the bathroom.’ She stressed on the ‘thought.’ ‘I just thought maybe you’ve had a feeling for a vision. You haven’t had one in quite a while. A vision in the bathroom has never happened before, but there’s always a first.’

Eternity noticed that Lettaya had dimples in her cheeks.

‘Is there a vision?’

Eternity shook her head. ‘No. I really need to use the bathroom for bathroom purposes.’

Lettaya gazed down with disappointment.

‘OK, but don’t close the paths, you never know where you’ll have a vision.’

CHAPTER 22

When she was finally alone in the bathroom, she clicked on the button on the side of the phone and swiped her finger across the image of the lock on the screen. **7 missed calls Denise**, she read on the screen. She tapped on the image of the small yellow envelope and it transformed into several lines of words, all written in capital letters. She read:

IT'S DENISE. I'VE BEEN CALLING, AND YOU HAVEN'T PICKED UP FOR THE LAST HALF AN HOUR, I WAS JUST CALLING TO HEAR HOW YOU'RE GOING, BECAUSE YOU RAN OUT IN A STATE LAST NIGHT. I THINK YOU ALSO FORGOT A COAT OUTSIDE THE FRONT DOOR. HANNAH SAID SHE VAGUELY REMEMBERED YOU HOLDING IT WHEN YOU MET THE OTHER NIGHT. I HOPE YOU'RE OK, AND THAT WE CAN MAYBE TALK ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED LAST NIGHT. TEXT ME.

Eternity tapped on the part that read 'Enter Message' and wrote 'Hi Denise' when the phone started vibrating. She caught it short of slipping out of her hand and into the toilet bowl and quickly swiped across on the image of the green phone.

'Hello,' she heard the sound say, then followed a period of crackling, as if some sort of entity was trying to break through the phone and attack her. 'Hey, (more crackling) on your ear.'

Eternity pressed the phone to her ear.

'Denise? Is that you?' she said.

Eternity distanced the phone from her ear when the crackles in the background became too loud for her to bear and neared it when she couldn't hear Denise.

'Yes. It's Denise.'

'There's a lot of noise. I can't hear you very well.'

'I'm on the road. I'm not going to be on the phone for too long anyway.'

'I can't be on the phone for very long too. I need to get to the funeral.'

'Funeral?'

'Yes. A friend died.'

'What friend?'

A friend from the house, thought Eternity. A girl who was brutally murdered down at the river, who was initially washed away by the current and then who happened to turn back up again the next day in the same river that she herself had awoken in.

‘You don’t know her,’ said Eternity.

‘I was just wondering if we could meet up again and talk about what happened yesterday. You didn’t even explain anything, just left like you’d seen a ghost or something.’

‘I can’t speak now,’ whispered Eternity, ‘I might get caught...’

‘What? Caught by who?’

‘My housemates.’

‘You’re scared of your housemates?’

‘It’s not about being scared. It’s out of respect.’

‘Yes, of course. When are we meeting up then?’

‘Tomorrow,’ said Eternity, without thinking. Could she even make it tomorrow? She didn’t even know what the plan was for the day. She could always sneak out late at night, when she was sure that everyone was fast asleep.

‘I’m glad it’s so soon,’ said Denise. ‘Come anytime.’

‘I’ll come when I can,’ said Eternity.

There was an intense rush of creaking and whooshing and crackling again.

‘See you tomorrow,’ Eternity said.

‘See you tomorrow,’ said Denise.

Eternity opened the bathroom door and extended her head to see if there was anyone lingering around. When she was sure that the coast was clear she stepped out and walked towards the Funeral Room.

CHAPTER 23

The room was crowded when Eternity entered. Most of the women were seated in silence, apart from two women whom Eternity was sure she had seen at Keira's daughter's Remembrance Day, sitting side by side occasionally pinching each other's arms and moving their mouths silently. As soon as they saw Eternity, all the women stood up and crossed their arms over their chests, uttering the words 'My Holy One, the Blessed One' in unison.

'OK ladies, sit yourselves down,' shouted Betty. She was unpinning the black cloth from around the window. As soon as the cloth was completely removed light flooded into the room, making every flaw on the women's faces visible.

Betty carried the black cloth that she had scrunched up into a ball to the large dining room table and dumped it on the top. She pushed the door shut, and was calling to Eternity, when the door opened again, and in walked a scarlet-haired wrinkly lady Eternity had never seen before and Natasha with puffy eyes.

'Close the door behind you Natasha,' said Betty. Natasha, head bowed, must have not heard Betty's order because she continued walking towards the circle of chairs. Betty sighed and pushed the door closed.

The scarlet-haired lady was standing upright in the centre of the circle, her bangles tingling as she lifted her arm up to gather her hair over a single shoulder. She was smiling at everyone who made eye contact with her and bobbing her head up and down, until the other person probably felt uncomfortable and looked away.

Betty waited for Natasha to seat herself in the only empty seat and then said:

'Welcome ladies. I am sure each and every one of you know why we are here today but let the Holy One here tell us in a few words.' Betty took a stride towards Eternity and pushed her into the circle. Eternity allowed herself to be led along.

'You didn't tell me that I was going to make a speech,' whispered Eternity, her face very close to Betty's.

'It's not really a speech,' Betty whispered back. 'You're only going to say a few words about the importance of today. I take that you know why we're here today, we *were* both preparing for this occasion today.' She wrapped her arm around Eternity's.

Eternity's muscles tightened, and a terrorizing scream filled her brain, continuing at a stable volume and tone. Was it her own inner voice, crying to get away? She could feel that everybody was gazing at her, patiently waiting for her to start the occasion, but the scream in her skull was making her incapable of thinking. She tried to think over it, to shout over it mentally but it wasn't working.

'Come on, my Holy One,' whispered Betty into her ear. 'Tell us why we are all here today.'

Betty's voice was the only one she could hear, although it was probably also because everybody else was sitting silently, eager to hear the words that were going to spill out of her mouth. Betty looked concerned, two deep lines had formed in between her eyebrows and her lips were pierced together creating several vertical lines through her lips into the flesh below her nose.

'We are ever only ourselves in nature. With the trees, with the rivers and mountains and hills and everything... absolutely everything that is in nature. They are the ones that determine who we are. I became friends with a single tree when I was still a little girl, I say around five or six. I played around its roots and took great care not to step on them. Because tell me girls, you wouldn't step on your friend, would you?' said the scarlet-haired lady. She placed her hands on her waist and twisted her body upper body from side to side.

'Shhh Rowena,' hissed Betty. 'It's not your turn. Later. My Holy One... We are waiting,' said Betty, looking straight at Eternity.

'I called it my tree. My tree. My tree,' continued Rowena, throwing her hair over her shoulder, dividing it into two parts and neatly placing each side on either of her breasts.

Eternity had no idea what Rowena was talking about or how any of it was related to the day's event. She could feel Betty's desperate eyes staring at her, almost burning a hole through her.

'We are all gathered here... on this day...today... to cele... to mourn the death of a member of our House,' said Eternity, trying to muffle the scream in her mind that was still raging with the same intensity. For all she knew she may have been shouting remarkably loudly to stifle the terror in her brain. She didn't want to speak. She glided her eyes over every woman one by one. They were still looking at her face with worshipping eyes, their expressions unchanged from when she had observed them before she had begun the speech.

'Continue,' said Betty.

‘We are here today to mourn Chiara,’ she said.

‘And cherish her memory,’ Betty added.

Eternity stalled, turned to look at Betty who glared at her as if she had done something terrible.

‘Now Rowena will speak,’ said Betty. ‘She is going to speak about death and what comes with it, what comes after it, and during it. Why you can also see good in it, rather than just bad.’

Rowena walked out of the circle and placed her hand onto Keira’s shoulder. Keira was smiling, as if proud to be the chosen one. Her smile was hastily replaced by a frown as Rowena removed her hand. She gently coughed and started speaking:

‘I have this longing within me and whenever I do I embrace the past. I think about how I used to climb to the top of this tall apple tree my parents had in their garden. I would imagine looking out at this wonderful fairy-tale like city with lights that never went out and tiny castles for houses, when in fact, all I ever looked at was this old derelict building that my grandmother lived in once. She had passed away by then, but I remember feeling her presence when I looked at that building. I knew she was there.’ Rowena rubbed the tip of her nose and gazed at the wall at the back of the room. ‘I used to try and imagine that our house was right in the centre of the world and I believed in it so much that one day I just walked away from home, thinking that wherever I was, as long as I found the centre of the world-- which couldn’t have been that hard could it? – I would be fine. But then I came across this river and I sat by it, watching the pebbles and soils, even the giant rocks get swept up and away in its flow and night fell without me realizing. Then I thought that I would never get home, and it was the lulling sound of the water, carrying all these things away that calmed me down. I never did find home. But the side of the river was my home now.’

‘What is she saying?’ asked Eternity.

‘Her usual stuff,’ whispered Betty ‘Just listen to her. It’s always super interesting. Sort of mystical. It calms you down.’

‘Chiara used to be my best friend. We spent three years sleeping side by side. We would always sit on the porch together. Chiara flashing her tiger tattoo on her right arm, even in the middle of winter. I, always picking at the dirt on my shoes. We were like a devoted couple, me and Chiara was. Now the river is also her home like it was mine. And trust me when I say this, there is no better place she could be.’

Eternity's attention was drawn to a movement outside the window. When she stared outside there was nothing there, then a figure emerged donned in a fancy black dress. It was Lettaya. She walked past the window her head bowed, disappeared to the left of the window and then re-emerged. She kept looking at something on the ground, becoming invisible as she bent down, observing whatever was on the ground and then standing back up. Eternity looked at Betty, her mouth slanting to one side in confusion. Betty shrugged as if she had no idea why Eternity was staring at her.

When Lettaya did not re-appear, she diverted her attention back to the circle of women. Serena rose from her seat. She was giggling at what seemed to be something that her own mind had conjured up because none of the other women were joining in. She removed her red formal coat, her red cardigan, her red vest and finally her red bra, giggling all the way. Then, she looked at everyone, keeping a prolonged gaze on Natasha, as if wanting her approval. Eternity couldn't take her eyes off her small orange nipples pointing at her.

'What is she doing?' Eternity leaned towards Betty.

'It's the way of the house my Holy One. We make ourselves look like the dead bodies. The way they were found when they were lifeless.'

'Yes, but how comes it's only her taking her clothes off?' asked Eternity, her eyes still nailed onto the nipples.

'One person starts it off and the others follow,' said Betty. 'It's just the way it is. There's not an answer for everything.'

All the women were glaring at each other now, lifting eyebrows, narrowing eyes, as if trying to trick the other into stripping next. There was an eerie silence during which the women were taking their clothes off, carefully eyeing one another, so they took the same pieces of clothing off together. Sunlight poured into the room at irregular angles, emphasizing some body parts while concealing others under sinister shadows.

Eternity looked at Betty who had also started removing her clothes. She slid one of her arms out of her red turtle-neck top, revealing a red spot in between her breasts, which had scabbed and was protruding over her skin like a small mound.

After all the women had stripped themselves from the clothing that covered the top half of their bodies and had dumped them on their chairs, Betty pulled Eternity out of the circle and guided her towards the window.

‘What’s happening? And I haven’t taken my clothes off? Should I take them off too?’ asked Eternity facing Betty, occasionally glimpsing down as she was unable to ignore the slightly droopy breasts that bounced.

Betty unclasped the lock of the window and let it fall onto the windowsill with a clatter. She slid the window upwards and fresh cold air blew into the room. Eternity noticed that the moon was suspended high up in the sky, despite it being the middle of the day.

‘Jump out my Holy One,’ said Betty. ‘I’ll give you a hand.’

‘You want me to jump out?’ said Eternity, sticking her head out of the window, on the one hand terrified that the window might slide back down hitting the back of her neck, on the other trying to get a good look at how high up she was from the ground.

‘You’ve done it before, my Holy One. You’ll be OK. I’ll give you a hand from up here.’

She climbed onto the windowsill. Betty pushed her bottom up firmly. Then, Eternity draped her feet outside and closed her eyes.

‘Hold onto my hand, my Holy One, and just jump down. My hand will act as a rope.’ Betty grabbed her hand and when Eternity hesitated she said: ‘You better jump down quickly and get the funeral ritual over and done with before the egg gets cold my Holy One.’

‘The egg?’

‘There will be an egg and a knife waiting down there for you, and Chiara’s photo. This is the most important part of the funeral. If you don’t cut the egg and if the steam does not come out of it, Chiara will not be able to transfer to the land of the deceased, where all the deceased live together. She’ll be trapped and suspended in uncertainty forever.’

Eternity held onto Betty’s wrist and let herself fall out the window, stumbling over the grass. She looked up to see only Betty’s hand swinging over the windowsill.

‘My Holy One,’ shouted Betty. ‘Are you alright? You seemed to have fallen down quite suddenly?’

‘I think I’m OK,’ murmured Eternity. She lifted herself up with difficulty, cracking the stiffness out of her spine.

‘Now can you see the egg and the knife?’ asked Betty.

Eternity couldn’t see them at first, and Betty must have seen them before her because she frantically shouted:

‘Don’t take a step back my Holy One. The egg is right behind you.’

Eternity turned around on the spot, and as Betty had stated, she lay eyes on a white egg, a knife with a gold decorated handle and a gold frame surrounding Chiara's vibrant face. Chiara's eyes were sparkling. She did not have as many freckles as she did when Eternity had seen her a few days ago. Her face was empty and strange without them.

Betty hit onto the glass of the window to capture Eternity's attention.

Staring down at Eternity, she said: 'Come on my Holy One. Everyone's waiting. The egg's going to get cold and Chiara's going to get trapped.'

Eternity diverted her eyes from Chiara's and looked up at Betty, who had suspended half her body over the windowsill and was holding onto the window frame. Both the house and the lawn were silent, as if it wasn't only the women who were waiting for her to carry out her duty, but nature in its entirety too.

'Come on ladies,' she heard Betty say, as she picked up the egg and the knife. As she did so, the frame tipped over, face down. 'The time has come. Come and see Chiara's soul fly to the heavens.'

There was a hustle within the room, and Betty's angry voice could be heard berating the ladies. 'Stop pushing Natasha.' 'Make some room for the others too.' 'Now that's enough, I'm going to push you all back now and none of you are going to see a god damn thing.'

The egg was barely warm amongst Eternity's palm and it had a slight wobble to it.

'How do I do this?' asked Eternity. It was not only Betty staring down at her now, but she saw a variety of different faces emerging and disappearing, as the women elbowed, pushed, and butted each other.

'Now this egg is a symbol of birth,' said Betty. 'You know how eggs hatch and chicks come out of them, growing into hens or roosters or some other sorts of birds, my Holy One?' Eternity nodded. 'Well. This one I boiled for a few minutes and kept it in warm water so that it could stay warm. So, with that knife that you have there, you're going to cut that egg, about half way up, like you would if you were going to eat a soft-boiled egg.'

Eternity tapped the egg on the area that she thought Betty was referring to. She remembered the salty taste of a fried egg, and the slippery mushy texture of a poached one. But it was this boiled one that she craved the most, because she remembered that it was her favourite.

'Yes,' said Betty. 'Just there.'

Eternity had an inkling that Betty's theory of freeing the soul of a deceased human through a boiled egg was utter nonsense. If the egg did contain a chick, it would have died a gruesome death during the boiling process and if it didn't, then it was a lifeless egg anyway. How was the life of a dead person going to be released through an egg devoid of any life? She was tempted to tell Betty about the irrationality behind this ritual, but then decided that this would damage the women's faith in the House, and she would probably not be able to convince them very easily anyway. Also, it was better to get the ritual over and done with before the egg got cold. God forbid that steam did not rise out of the egg into the heavens.

'Repeat these words while slicing my Holy One. May her soul ascend to the heavens and re-join with the offspring. I'm repeating. May her soul ascend to the heavens and re-join with the offspring.'

A solid lump gathered in Eternity's throat; a lump of misery and distress of having to carry out a duty she did not believe in. She wanted to cry loud and ugly tears.

She looked up at the window, Natasha and Sophie who were standing on either side of Betty waved at her for encouragement, their loose breasts swinging to and fro and hitting each other as they did so.

'Come on,' mouthed Betty. 'Do it.'

Eternity held the egg in the scoop of her hand and held the knife where Betty had approved. She looked at Betty who closed her eyes and smiled affectionately. She pressed the knife onto the egg, and immediately a white liquid oozed out, and gathered in her palm. Was this supposed to happen? Eternity tightened her grip around the egg to hold it together, because she could feel it dispersing inside her hand.

She looked back at the window, where Natasha and Sophie were replaced with Keira and Serena. They stared at her unblinkingly, each of them desperate to see the thin whiff that would only be visible for a few milliseconds. Eternity placed the knife into her pocket and started peeling away the top of egg, under the disgusted scrutiny of the women.

'What's she doing?' she heard one of them ask.

'Is she supposed to do that?'

'I'm pretty sure not.'

'It's just not right.'

She felt the crack broadening, the small pieces of egg shell that had dislocated from the sloshy egg white, cutting into her palm.

When the tip of the egg had been stripped from its shell revealing its milky shine, she reached into her pocket for the knife. The white liquid of the egg was dripping down the underside of her hand, invisible to the prying eyes at the window. She was certain that if she loosened her grip, the egg would crumble to pieces. She gave up on the knife, throwing it onto the grass, and instead removed the top of the egg—the only hard part—with her fingertips. Not even a tiny hint of steam escaped the egg. She did not dare look up at the window, terrified of the disappointed expressions she would likely see. The glare of failure. She had also forgotten to recite the single sentence that Betty had asked of her.

‘May... May your soul ascend to the heavens and may you meet the... the other one,’ Eternity stuttered, a little too late.

There was a solid tap on the window frame.

Eternity shifted her eyes upwards, while the rest of her body remained frozen. Betty was shaking her head in disappointment. Her fingers were bent like the legs of a roaming crab. She was thrusting her hands upwards, as if telling her to open something.

I must open my grip, thought Eternity. That’s what she’s telling me to do. To open my hands and free the soul.

Eternity wasn’t sure if Betty had realised that the egg was only keeping together with the support of her grip. But Betty’s bulging eyes terrified her. She loosened her grip and the egg crumbled to the ground in a half watery, half solid mess.

‘Oh God, what’s happened,’ she heard someone blurt.

‘Chiara is going to be suspended in uncertainty forever.’

‘She’s doomed.’

‘We’ve let her down.’

Betty hadn’t warned her that this may happen. There was no mentioning of a collapsing egg.

Eternity stared at the yellow and white clumps of egg on the green grass, and the transparent liquid of the egg running into the soil.

‘It’s all your fault Betty. Not mine. Yours. You didn’t boil the egg properly,’ yelled Eternity to make herself heard amongst the chitter and chatter of the women.

At last the knot in her throat unravelled like a bursting trouser button, and the tears gushed out of her eyes. She stared up at the women who were throwing their arms about, their eyes bulging with fury. Then, she heard the same gentle voice that she had heard at the river:

‘Ety don’t stare straight at the sun. You’ll burn your eyes right out.’ Eternity listened, but when she looked away there was only darkness.

CHAPTER 24

When her senses came back to her, Eternity found herself lying on a lumpy bed, a thin yellowed bedspread messily covering her legs. The first thing that caught her attention within the room were the identical banners that were hanging on all three walls of the room. ‘Castigation Room’ she read in blood-red letters. There was a half-filled water glass that no longer retained its transparency on the bedside table, that was clouded with dust and greened with moss. Next to that was a pink jam jar, filled with a see-through liquid (it could have been water). On the other side of the bed was another bedside table (the door on this one was only just hanging on) with a large stack of loose papers neatly sitting on the top. She realised that the page was swarming with tiny writing. Eternity picked a sheet up.

‘I deserve any punishment at any level seen fit, because I’ve betrayed the House by failing my duty,’ she read.

This sentence was written repeatedly on every single line, the letters on the first few lines round and plump, while they gradually transformed into scruffy frail twigs as they went along.

She tried to remember what had happened to her, and to her dismay she recalled Betty’s disappointed gaze, before everything was consumed by an inky-blackness. Eternity closed her eyes, and her mind was filled with the image of naked body parts, some saggy, some firm, but nonetheless all feminine.

She attempted to lift her head off the pillow, but no matter how much she tensed her neck and clenched her jaw she was unable to do so. She started thinking that she’d been bound to the bed, because her legs were resisting to move too. This caused her to doubt whether they even existed. To her delight, she was able to glide her arms up and down on the bed but found that after only two short movements they pulsed with fatigue. She slid her hand in between the pillow and her head and pushed with immense effort. She sat slouched on the edge of the bed for a few minutes, trying to remember why she so desperately wanted to lift herself up. Her legs were still there, hanging over the side of the bed, close to her in distance but aloof in feeling. They were bonier than she remembered them to be, her thigh thin enough to be wrapped around loosely with her thumb and index finger combined. She prodded them with the tips of her fingers and was surprised that they were unnaturally hard. Suddenly but slowly, trickling from

the top to the bottom, a heat filled her legs, as if warm coffee was being poured into her veins. She waited for the heat to subside, then wriggled her toes.

A black bedsheet had been pinned to the window frame with gold thumb tacks on all three sides and through it she could barely see the dull white sun shining. ‘Ety, don’t stare right at the sun. You’ll burn your eyes right out of their sockets,’ said a familiar voice. She let out a silent yawn, her desert-dry mouth opening at the bleached sky. Then, a darkness settled over her eyes. With the hallucinatory state of mind that came with dehydration she initially thought that she had sucked the sky into her body. This instilled a rush of joy in her, because this was a sign that she did in fact possess holy powers as the women of the House claimed. It wasn’t long before she realised that a large crow had in fact sat on the tree branch directly in front of the sun, extending its wings as if sunbathing, and blocking out the light. The crow flew off in a hurry and the light returned.

‘Ety, don’t stare straight at the sun. Don’t. You’ll burn your eyes right out.’

Her spine vibrating with weakness, Eternity let herself fall onto the mattress, resting her head on the uncomfortable wooden frame of the bed. Her tongue was swollen in her mouth, the sharp edges of her teeth pressing into it as she swallowed. The worse thing was that a sickening smell was diffusing out of her mouth, as if a person had recently died inside of her and was now releasing its putrid gasses.

There were whispers outside her door. She stopped swallowing and listened.

‘...alive?’ said somebody.

‘I don’t know. There’s no noise coming from inside. She hasn’t called out to anyone in days.’

‘Doesn’t she ever get hungry or thirsty? I swear you can’t stay without water for more than three days.’

Then, silence again.

Are they talking about me? thought Eternity. If they had doubts whether she was alive or not, then why didn’t they open the door and check on her? How could they treat someone Holy in this manner?

She wanted to call out to them, and opened her mouth to bellow Betty’s name, but all that she managed was a few successive rasps.

Surrendering to her inability to speak, she closed her eyes. As soon as she did Betty’s voice filled her ears:

‘You’ve ruined everything. This day. But, most importantly you’ve ruined Chiara’s afterlife. She will never be able to meet her child. You’ve eliminated the very reason she was living. Now, you’re going to stay in here, until you see what you’ve done wrong and come up with a solution to have Chiara’s soul pass into the realm where all the dead deserve to go.’

She saw the veins on either side of Betty’s forehead bulging. Her hair was thrown over the right side of her head, covering one half of her face. She saw herself being pushed into the room as she resisted, firmly holding onto the doorframe, splinters of wood being flicked around as she dug her nails into it.

She opened her eyes in distress and was relieved that the images disappeared as the room filled her vision.

Eternity reached over to the jam jar and stared into the liquid. There were swift movements in the transparent fluid, but the culprits were invisible.

‘Betty. There’s things swimming in my jar. I need water,’ she shouted.

She hoped that someone had heard her. The creaking of the door handle, the sight of a human face (furious or content it didn’t matter), fresh cold water was what she desired to see at that moment. No noise came from anywhere, even the birds had stopped singing.

‘Betty. Or anyone else,’ she waited in silence, holding her breathe. ‘Natasha, Keira, Rowena, Lettaya. Anyone. I need water.’

Again nothing. Had they really just left her to die? Did they not care? Had they all turned their backs on the Holy One, just because of a single mistake she had made?

If they were indeed trying to force the brutal death of dehydration on to her, have her body cracking like the large scales of fish, then she needed to escape as soon as possible. That’s what one part of her mind was telling her, the other part was trying hard to convince her to wait patiently. Maybe no one had heard her because they were doing yoga, or bathing or some other activity required of them to fulfil the principles of the House. There was a possibility that the next time she shouted Betty’s name, she’d come running with a half-filled glass of water, the other half having spilled out from her haste to get to her as soon as possible.

She was scared. Scared of being alone, but most of all scared of dying. The loneliness and the idea of dying alone just added to her fear. Her body was shaking all over, from inside out; the vibrations gradually intensifying. Was she cold? she thought to herself. Or was this what happened when death wrapped its cunning fingers around you? Did it press down firmly, infecting its chill into every bone? Her lower jaw rapped against her upper, the sound of teeth

hitting teeth echoed in the room and was probably loud enough to be heard from the hallway. But still no one came. Because no one cares, thought Eternity. No one cares that I'm the Holy One of this House, the messenger of both worlds. Then she heard the voice again: 'Ety don't stare right at the sun, you'll burn those eyes of yours out.'

'Whoever you are, if you're listening or watching or whatever. You may just be in my head.' She hit the back of her head mercilessly against the wooden bedframe. 'THERE IS NO BLEEDING SUN. IT'S ALL DARK. EVERYWHERE IS DARK,' she wailed, gazing up at the ceiling.

CHAPTER 25

Eternity had tried to switch on the light, but she had been unsuccessful. The switch clicked up and down, but the room remained concealed in darkness. She felt her way around the room and was relieved to feel the coarse material of the bedsheet/curtain lightly scratch at her fingers. Lifting it, she looked outside. The moon was barely visible behind the tall tree standing proudly in the lawn of the house next door.

Suddenly, a shininess caught her eye travelling slowly from the side of the House. It bobbed up and down and was round and smooth. As the shiny ball grew closer, so did two white eyes with black hollow centres. For every step the round ball with the two round eyes took towards her, Eternity took a step back until she ended up sitting on the bed. The curtain's tough material prevented it from rolling back down, so Eternity could see a small expanse of the lawn from where she was seated.

The bald head neared the window and pressed its nose onto the glass. The most unusual features of the head and therefore the ones that captured her attention were the two droopy earlobes that extended down to the shoulders and were each stabbed by a pair of elephant-themed bronze earrings. Then he waved at her and said:

‘Hello my deary dee. Long time no see. I’ve come to check on how ya doing.’

‘Mr. Ahdub’ she whispered, surprised that she remembered his name. But, despite her whisper and before she could say anything else the man said: ‘Yes, my darling.’

He looked so greasy and worn out under the moon's harsh light. Eternity found herself mesmerized by his furious green eyes. And, realising that she was staring at him awkwardly without blinking, she looked away. How did he know to find her here? And what was he doing here?

‘I’ll be with you in a second,’ she whispered, exaggerating her mouth movements thinking that Mr. Ahdub would not be able to hear her, and so could at least read her lips. ‘But, I shall need to close the curtains now.’

Mr. Ahdub placed his palm on his heart and bowed.

Taking extra caution to ensure that her eyes did not meet those of Mr. Ahdub's, Eternity pulled down the curtain with a firm tug. There was no way she would pull the bedsheet back up again.

She lay down on her bed and pulled the bedsheet over her head. Her warm hunger-ridden breath rose towards the sheet and steamed on her face. She was scared of Mr. Ahdub, because she did not recall telling him where she lived, and now he was here, with the excuse that he'd come to check on how she was. Why did he even care this much?

She closed her eyes and visualised the way in which Mr. Ahdub's shiny bald head had bobbed towards her. Except now it wasn't on the outer side of the window, but was standing over her, staring straight into her sweaty face through the bedsheet. She shrieked and begged him to leave her alone.

'Please, whatever you are, just stop. Go away. I don't like you standing over me. I just don't want you near me.'

Calmly, he lowered his face closer to Eternity's and said: 'I am Mr. Ahdub. Your Guardian Angel.'

CHAPTER 26

Nobody visited Eternity but Mr. Ahdub over the next two days. When he appeared out of nowhere again, the day after his first visitation, she had pulled the bedsheet over her head before his visit, as if she'd had an inkling that he was coming. He had lowered his head down to her again but said nothing this time. And just as he'd emerged, he disappeared abruptly. The day after this, he arrived as she was waking up from a dream, which made her think that he was responsible for the disruption of her fantasies. When she opened her eyes, trying to understand whether her dream was real, she saw him sitting on the corner of the bedside table. If a Guardian Angel popped in and out of one's life as he desired, then she could do without one. She had looked him straight in the eye this time, but he didn't seem interested. Instead, he sat still, staring out at the moon which was brighter than she had ever seen before.

He didn't come after this, and Eternity didn't remember how he had disappeared the last time he'd visited.

The day after his last visit she had a dream that convinced her to leave. In her dream, she was a girl named Winona. She was a leader of a group of women who were planning a war against all men. She had been murdered by somebody before her dream began. She saw that her whole body was covered in a solid black substance. A tall lady with bouncy curls beat the black coating with an axe, her curls bouncing off her shoulders every time she bent forward. With every hit tiny pieces of black crystal broke off the block and scattered around like poppy seeds. Then Eternity smelt what was covering her. It was strong, mind-spinning, and addictive kind of smell with an alcoholic tinge. A single wooden floorboard was removed from the room that she was laying in, and she had the feeling that once the block was beaten off her, she would be buried here for the rest of her deceased life. Hanging on the wall behind the woman with the curls was a faded photo of three happy people. An older woman and man, and a much younger girl. When she looked closely Eternity noticed that the girl in the centre was in fact Winona. She had the man's small nose and the woman's frizzy hair.

She woke up for a few seconds, opened her eyes, closed them and plunged into another dream. This time, the protagonist was herself in appearance, but unlike her situation in reality, she was trapped in a block of ice. After being passed around from one person to the next, she was thrown into a river, where she sank to the bottom. She stayed there, unmelting, for a long time. After what seemed like years, the ice melted, and she came back to life. Having long

forgotten what it meant to be alive, she was shocked by the natural process of breathing and accidentally inhaled a large amount of mossy water into her lungs. She tried to rise, grabbed at whatever she could, waves of silt blocked her vision, entered her mouth and tickled the back of her throat. No matter how much she struggled, she couldn't rise to the surface, because several strands of moss had wrapped their slimy greenness around her ankles and her wrists, hindering her movement. But she didn't die. She never died. But laid down staring up at a blinding blurry yellowish light at the surface of the river.

She woke up gasping for air.

CHAPTER 27

When she woke up the next day, she decided to try to open her door. Approaching the handle cautiously she pressed down on it firmly and to her surprise it released, allowing her to step out into the corridor. All the windows of the house were shut, the doors of the bedrooms closed, and the curtains tightly drawn. The lack of sound and movement from the House assured her that everyone was still sleeping. She wondered about the thoughts of the inhabitants of the House who'd not seen her since her five days of (five days was what Eternity could remember) imprisonment in that alien room.

Inside, the house was foggy, and initially contemplating that her eyes were failing her from fatigue, Eternity rubbed them with her palms. The mist still coated her eyes however and intensified with every step she took towards the kitchen.

Lettaya was seated at the kitchen table eating something crunchy from a small white bowl. Betty, her back turned to Lettaya, had a floppy pastry bobbing half out of her mouth. She was holding a pink iron onto a yellowed bedsheet that was hanging over an airer, incessantly pressing down on a button which released large amounts of steam onto the sheet and then directly onto her face, which was dripping with small drops of dew.

Betty popped the iron down on the kitchen counter, switched it off from the plug and wiped the pearls of steam from her face with her sleeve. She then grabbed onto the pastry dangling out of her mouth and bit into it. She turned around, glimpsed at Eternity for a split second, sat on the chair next to Lettaya's and said:

'G' Morning,' her voice muffled by the act of chewing.

Eternity's knees lost their strength and she grabbed onto the doorframe. Swarming through her mind were all the excuses she could recite about why she had failed to deliver her duty at the funeral.

'Warm that god damn thing,' said Lettaya. 'You're going to get maggots in your guts, like Keira who was shitting her pants all over the place last week. Like you don't remember the state of that sofa over there when she pooped all over it. You don't want that happening to you, do you my deary?' She lifted a mug to her lips, barely took a sip and then put it back on the table again, a few beige drops spilling over the edge.

‘I’ll be fine. Don’t worry. My gut burns maggots,’ said Betty, abruptly standing up, munching on the last of her pastry, while strolling past Eternity out of the kitchen and into the corridor. ‘Anyway, I’ve had enough of washing and drying today. You wash to dry and dry to wash again. I’m going upstairs to wake the other girls. Too much sleep is no good. We’re all going to be sleeping once we die anyway, no need for too much then,’ she said chuckling.

Eternity could hear the stairs creaking under Betty’s footsteps, then they ceased, and Betty shouted:

‘There’s more pastry in the fridge if you want some. You might like to warm them first though.’

Betty continued climbing up the stairs, the creaks getting fainter before fading completely. Eternity waited for her to shout something again, but she must have reached the top landing, because the unsettling sound of doors being open and shut followed.

Lettaya continued crunching on her cereal, grinding her teeth with every bite. When she had finished, she slurped the milk in the bowl, and slammed it on the table, before dropping in the spoon.

‘I think she said that to you,’ she said, her face still turned away from Eternity.

Eternity didn’t understand. Why were they behaving in this reserved manner? Why were they not questioning her as she expected them to? Why had they not referred to her as the Holy One even once? Had she been stripped of her title?

Her arms, losing all strength, failed to carry her body, and she collapsed in the kitchen doorway. She placed her hands on her knees and tried to control her breathing. She desperately needed to breathe in and out, like she was hungry for air, to regulate the feeling of panic that was racing through her body. How was she to behave from now on?

‘Get up,’ said Lettaya. ‘No one’s said *anything* to you. Don’t create random scenarios in your head and then wallow in misery.’ She stood up, and without turning to look at Eternity, walked into the living room through the door in the kitchen, and out onto the lawn, closing the balcony door behind her.

Not long after, after the questions swarming in her mind had subsided, she made her way up the stairs to her bedroom. Lettaya and Betty, although not entirely pleased with her performance at the funeral, seemed to have forgotten all about it. Or at the very least wanted to delete the

whole scene from the lives. had at least responded with maturity. Even though she had obviously failed them, they had behaved as if everything was OK. It was best not to dwell on it too much. As Lettaya had stated, she needed to stop creating scenarios that were unlikely to take place.

She decided that since Betty and Lettaya had not addressed her exit from her room of confinement, she was going to put all that had happened– the egg and the entire time she had spent locked up in the Castigation Room– out of her mind as much as possible. Her fear of being interrogated and possibly even exiled was replaced with relief. Why were Lettaya and Betty acting like nothing had happened? Wasn't it because they wanted her to remain with them? It was surely a signal that they wanted to put all that had happened behind them.

She sat on her bed, staring out of the window blankly. Outside, the tall tree let out a rhythmic vibration of angry leaves which fluttered erratically in circular motions with the wind. She watched as an elderly woman, in the back garden of the house next door paced back and forth, her back hunched, her legs bulging with thick throbbing veins. A few concrete blocks were placed against the fence that separated the house next door from the house behind it. The woman ascended the unsteady blocks and then descended them. Eternity watched her for the next ten minutes, until she witnessed her stumble off the blocks and fall face down. There was nobody around to help her. Eternity watched as the lady lifted her face off the blocks, a gush of crimson liquid dripped down onto the steps, forming a black stain. The lady stood like that for a while, letting her weight fall on to her flabby arms and then turned around towards Eternity's room. Eternity was disgusted by what she lay eyes on. The elderly lady's face had been split open horizontally through her forehead and vertically through her nose. As the lady started sobbing whilst looking into her eyes, Eternity walked away and locked her door. The feeling of being able to lock oneself inside one's own room was liberating. She was free within this small room that was her own, and no one could take this from her as long as she did not unlock the door, because once she did, the residents of the House could come barging in, making her do things she didn't want to, and as a result take her freedom away from her.

She gazed out of the window to see if anyone had helped the injured lady. But, not only was there no sign of the elderly lady. The stumbling stones had been taken away too.

CHAPTER 28

‘You think she’s gonna be OK?’ Eternity heard a familiar voice not too far away from where she was lying—where she did not know, because every time she attempted to open her eyes, they would automatically give way to the blinding sunlight that her eyes were having trouble adapting to.

‘Don’t worry it’s all under control,’ said another voice that she was also well acquainted with.

When she finally managed to open a single eye, she saw that Hannah and Denise were seated on a plain black leather sofa in the corner of the room. Initially the room looked alien to her, until she spotted the bald Star Trek toy on the white shelf hanging high up on the wall to her left. She closed her eyes in a haste, thinking that Denise and Hannah would be able to speak freely about her if they thought that she was unconscious. Eternity felt the urge to scratch at her face, as a single tear trickled down the side of her face onto the pillow, tickling her. She slightly opened her eyes to absorb her surroundings.

Hannah was wearing a puffy navy coat, a size too big for her. She was no longer seated, but was standing next to the sofa, the top half of her body leant against the wall. It was at the point when a second tear made its way down her other eye and a strong uncontrollable urge to itch at her face overcame her that she realised that her arms were tied back to the headboard.

Eternity observed Hannah’s face trying to discover an emotion or a gaze that would help her understand what was happening. She does sort of look angry, thought Eternity. Although, wasn’t this the same expression she had worn the last time she had seen her at Denise’s baby shower and the previous two times she had briefly met her? Her nose was scrunched up and her lower lip bore a slight quiver, the single vein at the centre of her forehead bulged out all the way down to the start of her nose. On another person these traits may have been linked to anger, on Hannah they were just part of her everyday demeanour.

Eternity scrutinised Hannah’s body language, the way her hands were crossed under her breasts, her nails a yellowish hue as she tightly grabbed at the zip of her coat. She was wearing a pair of bright pink shoes. There were muddy traces of footprints on the blue carpet. That probably explained the blunt irritation written all over Denise’s face, who was still seated. Denise looked down at her carpet, Eternity could have sworn that a puddle of tears had gathered in her eyes.

Eternity heard Hannah mumble something incomprehensible to her. She could only make out the last two words: 'gonna do?'

'...we've got bigger problems at the moment. What do we do now?' She gestured towards Eternity with her eyes. Eternity immediately closed her eyes.

'Just leave it to me,' said Hannah. 'I've been thinking about it for a few days.'

'You better think fast, before she starts questioning.'

'We'll get it over and done with successfully. I promise.'

CHAPTER 29

It all happened on the day after Easter. And although it being straight after Easter did not really affect what had happened to her, it gave her a pinpoint date to remember if she ever had to refer back to what she experienced. Days before the event she remembered that she was lying on the bed in Denise's house, listening to them babbling on about the mud on their shoes and the stains on the carpet, but mostly she had been listening to Hannah, judging Denise's every action, every word, accusing her of being a coward. Then she remembered how one of them (her eyes were closed so she didn't know who this was) had placed a palm on her forehead, as if checking her temperature and then patted the top of her head. Not long after, she remembered that a damp towel was spread over her forehead. And, a short while after that (well, she presumed that it was not long after), as she slipped in and out of consciousness, she remembered being fully conscious, sitting upright on the bed, her hands untied, munching on a caramel filled Easter egg, the caramel forming a stringy bridge from her lips to the egg.

She remembered falling asleep straight after gobbling up the whole egg, and then awakening to find that she was alone in the room, the lights were all turned off, including the lamp which was kept on out of habit even in broad daylight. She listened for any noises in the house that could inform her of the whereabouts of its inhabitants, and when none came, she decided, judging by the vivid moon, the mournful howling of the dogs in the neighbourhood, and the silence of the house, that it was night time and everyone was fast asleep.

When she had finally diverted her attention from the possibility of hearing human noises in the other rooms of the house, she felt a heaviness on her thighs—a weight that partially blocked the circulation of blood to her feet, causing her toenails to turn a light shade of grey. As she sat on the bed, tense and still as a caterpillar in a cocoon, she laid eyes on a shadow on the wall to the left of the window. It was a shadow in motion, something resembling eight long sticks which curved at mid-point, moving slowly towards the right, the sticks occasionally straightening and then bending once more. Then, she saw something slowly creeping past her. It was a spider casually walking, throwing its legs to and fro without a care in the world. How easy life would have been if she was a spider, creating her web and waiting for her food to stick to it.

Her legs had started to go numb. She looked down at her toes, which shone as the moonlight hit them. The weight on her lap had distorted the shape of her toes. She had to lift

whatever it was that was lying motionless on her lap. She tilted her head downwards, her eyes closed, then she opened them slightly and stared down. She stopped breathing all of a sudden, on purpose or by accident she did not know, but she felt as if she had forgotten the instinctual act of breathing. There, lying on her lap was a hunting gun, accompanied by a hardback notebook and a multi-tipped pen. Then she heard a voice—a voice that she had heard many times before, almost always in times when she was most distressed.

Don't stare straight at the sun, Ety. You'll burn your eyes straight out.

'There's no sun,' whispered Eternity. 'It's night time...whoever you are. How comes you can see me but not the moon?'

'Why of course I can't see the moon Ety. I don't exist in reality. I only exist within you. I'm part of you. You know that, don't you?'

Eternity nodded dumbly. She winced as she felt a touch on her shoulder.

'I'm here to tell you about what's been happening to you. You'd like to hear it all, wouldn't you?'

Eternity felt her head being pushed down from behind, and then a force pushing her head backwards from under her chin, propelling her to nod. She tried her utmost best to stop the invisible force from manipulating her body, by tensing her neck, digging her fingers deep into the mattress to give power to her shoulders, and pressing her chin firmly against her neck, but her body resisted to listen. She didn't want to nod because she didn't want to hear anything.

'Well, I count that as a nod,' said the voice. 'Firstly, there are a few things happening to you right now that you need to learn how to deal with. At the moment you are emotionally numbed. So, this means that you cannot clearly see or comprehend the harm done to you by the people you've encountered. And I'm really sorry about the things I'm going to tell you but these things you really need to know.'

'If you're me then you know that I don't want to hear these things,' said Eternity, her voice quivering after every syllable.

'You've no choice. If you've let the voice out in this way, then you must want to hear everything. You, yourself are the only one who can control how much I reveal. And, it's best that you hear these things. I will give you vital pieces of information that will guide you through life and teach you how to cope with certain situations that will arise. Also, don't you want to know how you ended up in the House?'

Eternity nodded, this time firmly.

‘Well, I’m pleased to see that you want to hear me talk. We’ll do a Q and A, shall we? What do you say?’

‘Yes,’ said Eternity. Forgetting that she had a massive hunting gun on her lap, Eternity pulled the blanket up to cover her chest, and the gun fell to the floor but made no sound.

‘OK. Have you got any plans for the future, Ety? I don’t know, the usual things that people generally plan about, that society inflicts on you, so you most probably don’t have any choice but to go along with. Think of marriage or children. Maybe a job, build a career, be a strong woman who lives independently by herself and adopts several hungry orphan kids in the latter half of your life?’

Eternity thought in silence. What were her plans for the future? She had never even considered the prospect of a future. For her it had always been the now; overcoming the now, coping with the now, enduring the now, never cherishing the now, embracing the now, or making the most out of the now.

‘Don’t say that you’re thinking of returning to the House. There’s no future there. Well, for you anyway. They’ll chop you to pieces, metaphorically speaking, and throw your remains into that river as sacrifice.’

‘No plans then,’ said Eternity sadly. ‘But I’ve always tried my best there,’ Eternity continued when the voice did not speak. ‘We’re all there for a reason and my duty is to help them connect with their children. What would they do without me? They need me.’ She sighed.

‘Bullshit,’ said the voice, blowing a raspberry. ‘When the hell have you tried your best? I mean you haven’t had a vision since you were pulled out of that river, right?’

‘That’s right,’ said Eternity at first. ‘No, that’s not true, I saw the girl in the pink pyjamas.’ Her voice faded into a wheeze.

‘No. That was not real. It was your mind just making things up, as it usually seems to do. So, since the girl in the pink pyjamas was all bull crap, they don’t need you then do they?’

‘I guess not.’

The lightbulbs of the lamp sitting on the bedside table and the small crystal chandelier hanging in the centre of the ceiling came on for a split second, flickered, and then went out. Immediately after, the wind beat at the window, the glass shook with rigour and then subsided. Eternity held her breath.

‘Not to worry,’ said the voice. Eternity imagined it smirking. ‘That’s just me breathing. My bodily functions can get a bit violent sometimes. So, anyway, where were we? Oh yes, that you’re a good for nothing at that place.’

Eternity was disheartened by the fact that she had no use at the House; the only place that made her feel of some kind of importance. But, she had destroyed everybody’s belief in her. What were they going to do with an Agent Between Life and Death, that portrayed no agency at all? Maybe it was time for her to start thinking about what she was going to do in the future, where she was going to go. Otherwise, what was the point of living if you didn’t have anything to look forward to? How could she continue living, knowing that one day she was to die without accomplishing anything at all? What was a future without an aim? What was the point of breathing without straining your mind to come up with an idea of what to do next?

‘Anyway, that’s enough thinking,’ said the voice. ‘I haven’t got all day you know.’

‘You can hear me thinking?’ asked Eternity.

‘Of course I can,’ said the voice. ‘I told you not more than ten minutes ago, that I speak as much as you want me to, which means we both are in direct contact with each other. Spiritually and mentally. You can just snap right out of me (the voice produced a clicking noise, resembling the click of a light switch) when you want, when you feel it’s the right time.’

‘How? I’d be happier if you weren’t around, but you’re not going away,’ said Eternity.

‘Shhh,’ hissed the voice. ‘It’s all just in your head. You need to want it. You don’t really want me to go away. So, here I am. Ta da,’ blurted out the voice. ‘Anyway, this is all getting boring now. Let’s get down to the interesting things. Like for instance, I’ll give you a list of things I think suck about you. Number one, you always stutter when you speak to new people because you’re nervous about what they’re going to think of you. Well, you know what? They think you’re a coward, lacking in confidence. So, if you want them to think good things about you then I’ll suggest that you don’t do it. Don’t stutter.’

The wardrobe’s door opened and then was slammed shut.

‘I’m not like that,’ said Eternity, gazing intently at the wardrobe. ‘I see you,’ she said, identifying a shadow on the wall next to the wardrobe. In fact, there were two shadows on the wall; two identical human shadows, that swirled around. They had long straight hair, the tip reaching all the way down to the start of the butt-cheeks and curling outwards into a hook. Their noses were small and gently curved upwards. Both shadows belonged to Eternity. They faced one another, their right hands raised, meeting in the middle, their fingers loosely clasped. The

Eternity of the right took the one on the left by the waist and spun her around in a perfect circle, the idle hand wrote out something for Eternity to read.

Eternity shrugged. 'I don't know what you're writing,' she said.

The Eternity on the right abruptly pulled her arm away from the other Eternity's waist, and without the support she fell backwards like a log. The standing Eternity wrote out the words again. This time the letters revealed themselves one by one. Eternity read:

WE HAVE COME TO GET YOU. TO HELP YOU.

'I don't need any help. I want to be left alone. I don't want to have to deal with things that cannot be real. I just want to be left alone. There. That's my plan for the future. Now leave me alone.'

She looked towards the shadow and noticed that it was shaking erratically, its mouth wide open, the pointy canine teeth clearly outlined on the wall like two spears. It laughed, an evil guffaw that sent chills down Eternity's spine. Eternity couldn't make sense of what it was laughing at. She felt sick.

'What are you laughing at?' sobbed Eternity.

'You,' said the voice, still laughing. 'It's so easy to scare you. You coward.'

Eternity pulled her legs closer to her chest and wrapped her arms around them.

'Go away.'

'No. I haven't even told you anything substantial yet. Don't you want to ask me any questions?'

Since the voice had no intention of leaving, Eternity thought that she might as well take advantage and ask the questions that were lingering at the back of her mind since she had woken up at the river.

'Who am I?'

'Who are you?' sighed the voice. The shadow moved a step closer to the bed. 'You sure do like a bulky question, don't ya? Well, where shall I start? Hmmm. One thing, your name is not Eternity. That's what you'd like to be called. Your birth name is... would you like to guess it?'

Eternity shook her head.

'Ethan.'

'Ethan. Yep, that's right, a boy's name. Your parents wanted a boy, but when you were born a girl, they decided to treat you like a boy anyway. Then, feeling guilty about it afterwards,

they started calling you Ety. That's what you remembered down at the river. You just thought that Eternity would be a good match to it. Eternity. It's just a dream. There's no such thing as an eternal life. It's all bullshit. And, then your mum killed the whole family...

'What?' hissed Eternity.

'Don't be so shocked. It wasn't intentional. She was trying to light the fireplace, and she put too much petrol and the wood was wet and woof it all blew into the house. Your mum burnt to death, the house caught on fire. Your dad was asleep, didn't wake up, burnt to death. Cat. Gone. You crawled out of the cat door and saved yourself. Yep. You're a miracle baby. Then, Lettaya whose daughter just died from cot death, saw you crawling past her front lawn, and raised you as her own. Didn't tell anyone you were not her own. She saw you on TV, tragic death of family of three said the news. Mother's mistake kills whole family. The extended family is all crying for you, but you're not dead you're alive, and Lettaya tells no one.'

The shadow rotated on the spot and clapped.

'So, yes Lettaya is your step mama, or mama if you like.'

'Was she in the House back then?' asked Eternity, rocking backwards and forwards on her bottom.

'No, she wasn't. The House comes later, when she meets other people in collective sessions on how to overcome grief. And, she thinks: what better place than a place that all grieving women can be together and share the pain that comes with losing a child.'

'How did I become The Agent Between Life and Death and when?'

'Good question. Well you always used to have these imaginary friends that you would speak to. There was Bobby and Toby and some others. And, Lettaya, you know not being all there with the grief. It made her go crazy, thought you were speaking to her baby. So, your superpowers...' The shadow curved its index and middle fingers on both hands into speech marks '...helped create the House.'

Eternity was taken aback by this. Lettaya her mama? Were her 'superpowers' fake?

'So, I can't really see the dead?'

The voice grunted. 'Ahhh you make me laugh. The truth is, that's for you to decide. I mean they do say that if you believe in ghosts you see them. So, if you believe in an afterlife and you believe that death is not the end, but that souls and spirits and all those things are dying to make contact with this shitty world, then yes you can communicate with them. By that logic, I may be real, or I may not be. It depends how you look at it.'

Eternity punched the mattress.

‘Now, I get it,’ she said. ‘I’ve started having doubts about whether communications with the deceased can actually be possible. Therefore, I am failing to have visions.’

‘Yep. That’s right. People who don’t believe in aliens never see them. Ghosts never visit people who don’t believe in the metaphysical world.’

‘So, if I strongly believe in the communications, then I’ll have visions and can go back to the House?’

The voice coughed.

‘To be honest, I wouldn’t suggest going back.’

‘Why’s that?’

‘Duh, because they don’t want you. They’re in the process of filling your position.’

‘I don’t believe you,’ said Eternity, pulling her knees closer to her chest. ‘You can’t just ask a recruitment agency to find a new medium.’

‘Well, all I can say is that you should believe in everything that I say. You go back, and bad things happen. Don’t blame me. I warned you.’

The shadow sat on the corner of the bed, bounced up and down, and made its way towards the wall on which it had initially emerged.

‘I’m getting bored now. You got any other questions?’

‘No,’ sobbed Eternity, ‘Just go away.’

‘Okey dokey, if you say so madam.’

Then, with the same randomness in which the voice had appeared, it abruptly vanished, leaving Eternity feeling abandoned.

‘Hey, are you still there?’ whispered Eternity, throwing the blanket off her legs and crawling across the bed towards the wall. She tapped the wall a few times in different sections, listening to the sound that resonated from within the tiles. Every part of the wall made the same hollow noise, like the echo of an empty stomach.

She rolled back to her pillows and let herself fall into the shallow dent that had been carved into the mattress due to her still-enduring lengthy sessions of sitting.

The voice hadn’t been all bad had it? she asked herself. It had been unforgiving in some of its remarks, but overall it had provided her with vital pieces of information about herself. The feeling that was now running through her veins, was probably most similar to finding the only missing jigsaw piece in a corner of your house after losing all hope of discovering it. The

voice's remarks made her realise that she had been shut out from her own life, that her eyes had been blindfolded and that her ears had been stuffed with cotton wool. So many questions were coming to her now. If Lettaya was indeed her 'adopted' mother, then why had she not made this obvious? Why were the House eager to recruit another Agent Between Life and Death, without giving her another chance? As her mother, why wasn't Lettaya doing anything to stop them? Or was she the one trying to get rid of her? And probably the answer to the question that would answer all her questions: What had happened to her memory? She desperately wanted the voice to come back.

CHAPTER 30

Eternity descended the stairs, walking on her heels, to reduce the creaking of the wooden floor as much as possible. About half way down she felt a stabbing pain along her ankle, as if she had pulled a muscle. She stopped and leant against the banister, the top half of her body almost suspended over, stretching her legs out to release the tension in her muscles. She thought of how broken the human anatomy was, how at any moment in life, pain could easily strike and leave you immobile. Leading a sedentary life (for god knows how long) had weakened her muscles, causing her knees to wobble like jelly. After a few seconds the pain eased away, and she was able to walk once more.

When she reached the bottom of the stairs she heard the clinking of cups and the clatter of cutlery coming from the kitchen. From the golden mirror hanging in the hallway, opposite the kitchen, she could see Hannah and Denise dining around the table-for-two, lifting forks to their mouths automatically and wiping their lips with pretty red napkins. Hannah stood up, opened the cupboard over the sink, pulled out a tall glass and poured herself some water from the tap.

‘You want some?’ she heard Hannah ask Denise, whilst patting down the drops of water that had spilled on her chin with her navy polo-neck.

‘Nah all good thank you,’ murmured Denise, chewing aggressively on the chunk of food that she kept circulating inside her mouth.

Eternity caught sight of dark purple chunks in a small white plate, which she guessed was beetroot salad. On the bigger blue plate next to the small white one was a whitish thick sauce which she could not name. There was something partially eaten laying on two large dinner plates with a green bottle filled quarter of the way with a blackish liquid sitting in the centre of the table. Through the kitchen window Eternity could see that the streetlights were on, despite it being the middle of the day.

‘We could just drive her away and you know, just leave her there,’ said Denise, looking out of the window. ‘So much weight would be taken off our shoulders?’

‘You’re right, I guess,’ said Hannah. She twirled the glass and gazed down at the water that splashed in miniature waves.

‘Don’t you think that if she carried on staying there they would have eventually...’ Denise popped a sizeable piece of flaky white fish into her mouth and restarted the aggressive

chewing process. ‘...I don’t know, probably killed her or something, for tricking them all this time. There’s people who have lived in that house for more than fifteen years. Wouldn’t the feeling of betrayal of all those years make them do terrible things?’

Hannah shrugged, placed the glass down on the counter, and wiped her hands on the purple chequered tea towel that hung on the handle of the oven.

‘Yes, I guess,’ she said, in a tone devoid of certainty. ‘But we’re essentially sending her away to die. She’s not lived anywhere else before. She has no skills that would help her survive in the outer world. She’s never even gotten on a bus for god’s sake. What if she died crossing the road?’

‘Girl, she barely remembers anything to do with the House, it won’t really make a difference for her. Also, it’s not like we’re going to drop her off at the side of a random road. I’ve spoken to Mr. Johnson, he said he’s willing to take her in and look after her till she’s ready to look after herself,’ said Denise, dropping her fork onto her plate. A lengthy tinkling reverberated from the kitchen all the way to the hallway.

Denise, her back turned away from Hannah, smiled and itched the bulges of flab around her waist. She picked up her glass, leaned back and rested the glass on her round pregnant belly.

‘You think she’s going to be OK, then?’ asked Hannah. ‘I don’t know who this Mr. Johnson guy is. You say he’s going to be able to look after her?’

‘You really think that I’d send her someplace bad?’ Denise took a sip from her cup, and then it on her belly again.

‘Well we did drug her, so I can’t be quite sure.’ Hannah picked up a red apple from the grey bowl in the far corner of the kitchen counter, threw it in the air, and then caught it (just barely) as it came spiralling down. ‘Shouldn’t we have gone to see it ourselves first, before giving her away?’

‘Hannah,’ sighed Denise, ‘There are so many people like her there. People who’ve lost their minds, unstable people, grieving people, hurt people, anxious people, etcetera et cetera, she’ll fit right in, she’ll be happier there. We keep having to drug her here from the fear that she’ll wake up one day and remember everything. How can we do this forever? Her body will fail eventually. Is that what you want?’

Eternity made her way down the stairs and rested her back on the wall to the right of the door. She tried to distort her face into several expressions other than the sullen one she had from having heard every word they had said. She sucked in her cheeks, bit down on her lip,

clenched her teeth, knit her eyebrows, till an envelope fell out of the letterbox, and landed address-side-up on the threaded hippy rug. She walked towards it (on her heels) and picked it up. The letter was for Denise. The postman could not have dropped the letter in at a better time. Delivering the letter to Denise would make a good excuse for her to enter the kitchen.

The italicized black letters in the centre of the envelope read:

Ms Denise Prescott
Flat 6 Violet House
2 Violet Grove
NG9 1PA

Centred, at the top of the envelope was a name written in purple bold-typed letters:

Sunrise Care Home. Caring for you.

She was tempted to rip open the letter but was aware that it was her entry ticket into that kitchen.

‘I’m sure she will be surprised when she finds out, but with the state she’s in she won’t even realise what’s happening to her until much later,’ said Hannah. ‘Isn’t that true?’

‘Well, I hope it is,’ said Denise.

‘What if she resists?’

‘What do you think we do?’

‘Drug her.’

They were going to send her away. She didn’t think that she could contain her anger, especially when she made eye contact, so she decided to make her way up to her room and wait until Denise and Hannah finally came up to break the news of her departure from the only world she had felt the closest to belonging.

She slowly ascended the stairs, occasionally gazing down at the purple letters on the envelope: Sunrise Care Home. The name gave the place a paradise-like reckoning. Remembering Keira’s speech at her daughter’s death’s anniversary, when she’d described the care home that she’d been admitted to, Eternity imagined a grand yellow building with all sorts of flowers planted in its massive garden, surrounding its’ all four sides. Two roman columns, as white as newly blossomed jasmines, would stand on either side of the front threshold like

guards protecting the individuals within from the outside world which had resulted in their admittance to the building in the first place. The building would undoubtedly have several rooms, designated to each individual carrying the burden of a variety of psychological frailties like a sack of potatoes.

When she reached her room, Eternity closed the door behind her. She prayed that both Denise and Hannah forget that she existed and let her live in this room until the end of her life.

Eternity dropped the letter onto the bed and then slid it under her pillow and walked over to her room's door, pressing her ear firmly onto the solid wood. The short and concise tapping of high heels, initially from about halfway down the staircase, proceeded towards the top of the stairs, and finally vanished just outside her door. Then, a confident knock.

'Busy!' she said.

The person on the other side knocked again.

'I said I'm busy.'

'You're not,' said Denise firmly. 'What could you possibly be busy with?'

Eternity pulled open the door. The wind of the swinging door caused her hair to fly out from behind her ears, settling on either side of her face.

The first thing that caught Eternity's attention was Denise's peculiar attire. She stood, fingers pressing into the bouncy flabs on either side of her waist, wearing a pair of mismatched pyjamas, a navy polka-dotted bottom with a burgundy striped top. The contradiction of the dots with the stripes made Eternity dizzy, almost nauseous. Perhaps, the most out-of-the-place piece of clothing on Denise was the silver metallic stilettos that were painfully squashing her feet.

'What's happened to you?' asked Eternity, unable to divert her eyes from the pinkish bulging upper part of Denise's foot.

'Pregnancy's happened to me,' said Denise, looking down towards her feet. 'I can't even see my own feet. Does it look that bad?'

Eternity diverted her attention away from Denise to the downstairs hallway, where she thought that she saw something moving rapidly across.

'No,' she said absentmindedly.

Denise threw her legs out towards the sides separately, then tipped from side to side. 'I'm here to tell you something.'

'I know what it is,' blurted Eternity.

Denise placed both hands, fingers stretched, over her belly.

She wanted to beg Denise not to send her to a care home to stay in small spaces with people she did not know. Her brain was churning a monologue which she was sure would be highly effective if she managed to spill it out.

Please don't put me into a care home. I promise I'm totally sane. I am sane. I'm going to try and be saner. I am going to try my best to be sane. I am not really insane. I'm just different. Just because I'm different doesn't mean I'm insane.

But she didn't deliver this potentially all-effective manifesto, instead her lips quivered under the weight of all the things that were building up in her mind. She took a step towards Denise who was staring at her with a confused smile, and said: 'Where's Hannah?'

'She's going to be back in a couple of hours. She had a few things to sort out.' Denise's voice was unusually soft and gentle.

'She's not going to come back, is she?' asked Eternity, itching the crown of her head. 'She may want to seem tough, but she's really a coward and doesn't have the guts for all this confrontation.'

'What are you talking about? What confrontation? Listen to me,' she said, wrapping her fingers around Eternity's wrist. 'There's this man I'd like you to meet. He's really nice and he's willing to take care of you...'

Denise spoke quickly, merging all her words together. Eternity found herself lost at the beginning of Denise's speech and could only pick out certain words here and there. But, the questions marks floating in her mind had now bobbed away. Yes. They were going to get rid of her. Yes. They were going to send her away to live with complete strangers so that she would get mentally better. Or worse, thought Eternity. Definitely worse. As Keira had pointed out how could one possibly stay with individuals who were suffering from psychological frailties and still stay mentally intact?

'What do you say?' asked Denise, pushing her face towards Eternity's.

Eternity reflected back on the conversation that she had heard between Hannah and Denise in the kitchen. She can't even remember how to behave in the House, she remembered Denise saying. How did she know about the House?

'How do you know about me not remembering how to behave in the House?' asked Eternity, staring into Denise's eyes. 'How do you even know about the House. You never made it obvious that you knew.'

'What?'

‘Don’t what me!’ said Eternity. ‘For once give me a proper answer.’

‘You’re insane,’ said Denise. ‘That’s exactly why we’re sending you off. Because, you’re not right up here.’ She tapped the side of her head. ‘Also, I’m not going to answer all this bullshit. None of it’s true and that is that. We don’t know anything about no house.’ Denise held her right hand over her chest. ‘Hannah was going to tell you in a better way,’ she continued, considerably calmer. ‘But you couldn’t wait, could you? Had to be your usual impatient self. It’s for your own good.’ She held onto Eternity’s chin and pulled her towards herself, wrapping her arms around her for a rough hug. ‘Shall we go downstairs and make some tea?’ asked Denise.

‘But, I want to speak about everything now, Denise. I want you to tell me everything now. How I ended up here? Why I don’t remember the past few days. Or weeks. What’s happened to me?’ asked Eternity, with a muffled voice as Denise pressed down on the back of her neck, forcing her face into her shoulder.

‘I think we should wait for Hannah,’ said Denise. ‘She won’t be happy if I started speaking without her.’

Denise locked her arm around Eternity’s and they made their way down the stairs.

‘I don’t want to be with other people,’ she said.

‘You sit down. I’ll make the tea,’ said Denise.

Denise pulled out a chair, guided Eternity around it and patted on the seat. ‘Come on sit down.’

After Eternity had seated herself, Denise picked up a plain blue mug from the metal dish rack and filled it with water thrice, each time barely pouring it into the kettle. Eternity watched as the water hit the edge of the kettle, splattering onto the kitchen. Denise opened the cupboard next to the one over the sink and pulled out what seemed to be an old jar half-filled with granulated sugar.

The kettle whistled as it came to a boil. Denise picked the kettle up while the water was still bubbling, causing another few splashes to hit the counter. Eternity doubted whether there was enough water left in the kettle to make two mugs of tea, and when the tea was placed in front of her, she realised that she was right. Her mug was only half full and the liquid was almost white.

‘This is tea?’ asked Eternity, tipping the mug towards Denise, who had now seated herself adjacent to Eternity.

‘Of course, it’s tea, drink it and you’ll see. Milky is the best kind,’ said Denise, blowing at her mug.

Eternity looked into her mug and then back up at Denise, with an expression of desperation. She sniffed at it.

‘But I don’t like milk,’ said Eternity.

Denise sighed. ‘Since when? You’ve always liked milk.’

‘I really don’t.’

‘And I’m telling you that you do. I’m telling you, there’s a few missing pieces up in that head of yours.’

Eternity twirled the mug and watched the white liquid spin in pretty frothy swirls.

‘Denise?’

‘Yes,’ said Denise, banging the mug onto the table.

‘How did I even get here?’

‘You’ve asked that one before babe and got an answer. You know how I am. I don’t like repeating myself.’ She picked up her mug.

‘I’m not crazy, you know,’ said Eternity, fed up of asking question that were never answered. ‘I’ve just forgotten things. Most things. Believe me. Something bad happened to me and then I woke up and I was like this.’

Denise slurped at her tea, and then slammed the mug on the table, perhaps with more force than she was expecting herself. She pulled the magazine (Hello!) stranded on the far end of the table towards her and inattentively flicked at the pages.

‘What’s this thing that’s happened to you? We’ve realised that somethings the matter with you for a long time now and we’ve been trying to find out. And every time, you tell us that you woke up after this terrible thing and then you were just like this. No memory, nothing apparently.’ Denise picked the magazine up and folded the left side under the right.

‘I’ve said this before?’

‘Several times. You certainly have been acting quite strangely lately. You were always strange anyway, but this time it’s different. You keep drifting off into long slumbers, and no matter how much we try we just can’t seem to get you up from them. And then you keep murmuring about random things. Like the other day you were saying something about not looking at the sun or your eyes would get burned out or something. And it was bloody dark for god’s sake.’

Denise unfolded the magazine, and let it fall on the table.

‘Denise?’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you think secrets are bad?’

‘Well it depends.’

‘There’s somethings that I’ve been warned not to talk about. Things that I don’t feel comfortable speaking about. Things that I don’t know how to put into words, because I don’t understand them. Things that don’t make sense.’ While uttering these words sluggishly, as if speaking to a person slow in understanding, Eternity was also considering whether to once more bring up her knowledge of their potential connection with the House.

‘I don’t understand,’ stuttered Denise. ‘What are you exactly trying to...’

I think what I’m trying to say is rather clear to somebody who is well-acquainted with hiding vital information from someone they supposedly consider a dear friend, thought Eternity to herself.

Without waiting for Denise to complete her sentence Eternity interrupted.

‘I suppose I’m just trying to ask if everyone has something that they hide from a dear friend? More precisely, if there was something that you have, I mean had, within you that was weighing you down and you knew that if you tell anyone, you or they might get harmed, then would you still tell them?’

‘This is a hard one,’ said Denise, standing up. ‘Maybe Hannah can answer that one.’

Just as she had expected, Denise had chosen to shy away from giving her a direct answer. How could she answer a question whose answer could possibly give away their connection with the House, as she had heard them conferring in the kitchen. Denise had denied everything, but I am no child, thought Eternity. Was there a possibility that her mind was creating scenarios that had not taken place? Could her mind invent things out of the blue just as it destroyed the past twenty odd years of her life? The answer, she thought, was yes and yes.

‘May I go back to my room until Hannah comes back?’ asked Eternity, as she rose to her feet, her fingertips pressing painfully against the top of the table.

‘Yes, you can. I’ll call you down when Hannah comes back,’ said Denise, before tipping the last few drops of her tea into her mouth.

Eternity sauntered out of the kitchen and then ran up the stairs, closing the door behind her. She felt relief that she was finally away from people who were eager to manipulate her life

without listening, without hearing her misery and seeing the deep wound that loneliness had scoured in her.

She sat on her bed and started thinking about all the events and significant objects that she remembered encountering in the past few days, carefully attempting to separate the ones that she was almost certain she had made up from the ones that she was sure had taken place. She thought of the children's book which she'd tucked under the mattress in the House and wondered if anyone had found it. She wished she had it with her, so she could flick through it, looking at the colourful photos and reading through her notes of all the things she thought she remembered. Remembering was comfort. In front of her, lying on top of the windowsill she noticed a pink notebook, its corners frayed and its spine painfully cracked. She grabbed it and noticed that a pen was tucked in between the pages. Turning to the first empty page she drew a dot, then filled it in.

She took a step towards the window and leaned the top half of her body on the windowsill. Everything was motionless outside, the bare branches of the trees, the two cars parked on the side road, the dark green bushes in the garden of the house next door, the empty flattened cardboard cup laying on the floor in the back yard of the flat. Amongst all the stillness Eternity spotted a slight movement in the bush in the garden next door. The movement was sudden and happened in short bursts before subsiding for a few seconds and commencing again. Eternity spotted a tiny blackbird hopping around in the grass, looking around in a state of panic as if it was desperate to be unseen. Next to the circle she wrote: *One Blackbird*.

She continued to observe the outside, trying to spot any kind of movement. Movement suggested a sort of reality for her, whereas anything that was unmoving could have been nothing more than a portrait, a depiction of something that she wanted to see, an image drawn by her mind. From behind the building flew a black and white pigeon. It sat on the decorative roof of the window to the left, craning its neck left and right as if admiring the view. After a few minutes it flew towards the window above, its wings reaching out either side, squashing its head into invisibility. It extended its claws, trying to set a foot on the windowsill but pulled its claw back abruptly as the spikes placed on the sill pricked at it. Insistent, the pigeon continued its struggle, it fluttered its wings in large waves, not moving backwards or forwards but suspended in mid-air. Eternity blinked. And when she opened her eyes the pigeon had gone as if it had never existed. She opened the window and leaned out, looking around for the pigeon. It couldn't have gone very far as her blink had barely lasted a few milliseconds. But it had disappeared, that is

if it had been real in the first place. Eternity drew another circle under the previous, and filled this one in too. Next to it she wrote: *Pigeon Spikes*. She couldn't be sure if the pigeon had existed at all, as it was there one second and gone the next, but she was sure that the pigeon spikes were there. She had felt the pigeon's pain when its claws had touched the spikes and she was sure that emotions were real. This justified the pigeon spikes existence.

The house next to Denise's was some sort of a care home for the elderly. Through the windows of the lower floor, Eternity could see an old lady with long grey hair, dressed in black from head to toe, open the back door and quickly walk towards the wooden gate that was locked with a chunky gold padlock. She had a doll in her hand, its head bald, its body bare. Eternity watched her tug at the lock, trying to open it, possibly to escape. This made Eternity wonder whether they were treating her well in the care home. They probably weren't. Why else would she want to leave with such desperation? She pulled at the lock for a long time. Then about ten minutes later a carer came outside and said something to her. Without resisting, the old lady allowed herself to be taken indoors. A couple of minutes later, Eternity saw her in the glass room that was attached to the main building, sitting on the sofa, staring at a bookcase of books. The carer came in every five minutes or so to check her. Eternity spotted the doll cradled in her arms. She rocked her arms occasionally, as if trying to put the doll to sleep. Eternity placed three new circles one under the other, and filled them in. *Delusional older lady*, she wrote next to the first circle. *Real doll*, she wrote next to the second and next to the last one she wrote, *carer*. Then, she saw an older lady walking across the room. She couldn't help but think that she wasn't real as she was travelling very rapidly for a person of her age. At first only the top of her body was visible, her lower half concealed by a wall. Once she had walked into the next room, her lower half emerged, and Eternity noticed that her speed relied on a walker that she was pushing along. Eternity drew another circle and filled it in. Next to this one she wrote: *Second Old Lady with Trolley*. Then she scribbled over the Trolley and drew another circle and filled it in. Next to this one she wrote: *Shopping Trolley*. She had seen the wheels moving after all.

CHAPTER 31

It was six in the evening when Eternity heard a knock at her door. She had continued writing, documenting all the qualities of Denise and Hannah, the conversations she remembered having with them, the horrible things they had said to her, the nice things they had said to her, trying to determine which ones had happened and which ones she had imagined.

‘Can you open the door please? I don’t know what’s taking you so long, but I really need to speak to you.’

Eternity took a deep breath and tried to prepare herself for all the things that Hannah was going to say to her. She imagined Hannah blurting everything out at maximum speed, without taking a single breath, so that Eternity wouldn’t have a chance to say anything to contradict her. Because according to Hannah, Hannah was always right. And, why on earth was she not opening the door herself. It wasn’t as if they had provided her with a key to lock herself inside.

There was another knock at the door.

‘I’m coming in.’

The door was opened and Eternity stood in front of it, her arms pressed to her sides, her eyes tightly closed, causing her eyelashes to curve upwards. She stood in this way for what seemed like ages and when Hannah made no noise, she opened one of her eyes and then the other to Hannah’s angry face. Hannah’s knuckles were pressed onto her hips, and the triangular shape of her bent arms resembled wings, the wings of an angel, but Eternity knew too well that Hannah was no angel.

‘God damn,’ sighed Hannah.

‘Sorry,’ said Eternity, struggling to keep her eyes open, as they were insistent on keeping Hannah out of their vision.

Ask her about the secrets they’ve been keeping from you, whispered a voice in her mind, knocking on the inside of her skull with its miniature hands.

‘I know that you’ve been keeping things from me,’ she said nervously, gazing at the brown stain on the carpet. ‘Have you?’

‘What’s this you’re asking me?’ Eternity noticed that Hannah was looking past her shoulder at the notebook lying on the pillow.

Eternity attempted to divert her attention by saying: 'I'm afraid.'

'I know you're scared,' said Hannah affectionately. 'Denise has told me that you've starting querying things, and I think you already know what I've come to speak to you about. I don't approve of eavesdropping, I must say. But, I'd like you to trust me. There is nothing to be scared of. Know that everything we're doing, it's all so that you could have a better future without all the bullshit that's filling up your brain and causing you to act the way you do.'

Hannah scratched at her chin.

Please let this not be real, please let it be imaginary, like that pigeon, who was there one second and gone the next. She shut her eyes and then opened them again, but unlike the pigeon Hannah was still there. 'I don't need care.'

'You do need care. You can't live by yourself. What with all the talking to yourself and gliding in and out of sleep. You bloody sleep more than a new born baby. Just gone for days.'

Because you've drugged me, said the voice in her head.

'Because you've drugged me,' said Eternity. Immediately after she had uttered these words, Eternity prayed that she be teleported to somewhere other than there.

'What?'

Eternity winced and ground her teeth.

'You see what I mean? And you say you're not crazy? Why the bloody hell would we drug you?' She laughed condescendingly. 'I mean, do you see now that you need to be under care. Coming up with things like that. Drugs ha? That's total bullshit. You're total bullshit,' said Hannah, throwing her arm in front of her. Her fingertips swept across Eternity's forehead. 'You need to live with people who are able to take care of you better, who'd make your brain better. Take all these inventions out of your brain, or at least encourage you to put them to good use. I don't know, write a novel or something.'

Forced drugging: Imaginary, noted Eternity mentally.

'That's not true, Hannah. I need time, not to be sent off to live with complete strangers. Time. And then it will all get better by itself. I'll be OK with your support. All I need is you and Denise, and of course somewhere to stay.' A single teardrop spilled out of Eternity's left eye and landed on her chest.

Denise was moving around in the kitchen. The tinkling of glass echoed into the hallway.

'Please don't just dismiss the idea of asking for help. They will be able to give you answers for your questions. Me and Denise are just normal people, we're not trained. We can't

give you the answers that you need. They will help you get better. We can't do that. Most of the time we don't even know how to look after ourselves, let alone taking care of somebody else.'

'But my questions are for you,' said Eternity.

'Please don't ask me questions I won't have the answers to. Denise and I are going to be there for you, in the place you're going to be living.'

'Will you visit me often?'

Hannah let her head drop, and Eternity thought that she was probably trying to focus on the brown stain as a form of escape.

Downstairs, the tinkling of dishes had ceased.

'Will you Hannah?'

'We will,' said Hannah, lifting her head back up.

'Yes,' said Denise, from the bottom of the stairs.

'I'll be waiting,' said Eternity.

Eternity was expecting (and hoping) for Hannah to pity her, to tell her that they weren't going to send her away, that they loved her and were willing to support her. But Hannah just turned away and started walking towards the stairs. 'Got stuff to do,' she said.

Eternity leaned against the doorframe and waited for Hannah to come back. She couldn't be this inconsiderate, could she? But when she did not return, Eternity remembered that it was Hannah she was thinking about. The Hannah who was always ready to attack, the Hannah who always thought that she was right, the Hannah who could never put herself into anybody else's shoes.

Eternity closed the door and tried to imagine how she would spend her days at the care home. She imagined that she would be left alone most of the time in her room. There would be a communal room where all the psychologically fragile would gather in the evenings to socialise. She would be forced to sleep at a certain time every day and be woken up in the early hours of the morning. Breakfast would be at the same time every day, regardless of whether one was hungry or not. Lunch at the same time. Dinner at the same time. Bath at the same time. It occurred to her, that it would not be that different than the routine in the House.

As she was deep in thought, leaning against the windowsill and observing the elderly lady with the doll next door, she heard a gate open. She tilted further forwards and saw a tall middle-aged lady with short black locks enter the gate. The lady passed out of Eternity's view

as she made her way towards the main entrance of the flat. She could only see Hannah puffing out her cheeks and looking flustered as she tugged at the gate's lock and cursed. As soon as the gate's lock slid into place with an ear-splitting screech, Hannah too climbed the stairs and followed the lady inside.

Eternity listened carefully.

'This is a take-the-shoes off house me darling,' said Hannah.

'And we also prefer that you wear slippers. No stepping on the floor with bare feet,' said Denise. 'We've got these brown soft ones, or you could have those open-toe ones if you like.'

'Eternity. You've got a visitor,' shouted Hannah.

Without giving it a second thought, Eternity pushed open her door, and made for the stairs. When she reached the bottom of the stairs, she saw that the lady was younger than she seemed from afar. Eternity concluded that it was the way that she carried her body which made her seem at least a decade older. The way that she hunched her back, as if her head was too heavy for her spine to carry. The way that her thin lips were lost on her face as they merged in with the paleness of her skin. The unfortunate colour, size and material of the clothes that she was wearing; musty beige, straight cut jacket, velvet. She was holding onto the wall in the hallway, trying on the brown soft slippers, admiring them on her feet and then trying on the open-toe ones, before slipping her feet into the brown ones again.

'Hi. I'm Eternity.'

The lady looked up, and as she did, the brown slipper slid off her toes. Eternity realised that the lady was in fact no older than herself. Her face was contorted into a warm smile, which puffed up her cheeks, and hid her eyes behind two thin lines.

'Which one?' she asked Eternity, lifting her foot with the purple slipper.

'The brown one. They seem comfier,' said Eternity, distracted by Hannah who emerged from the kitchen.

'This is Rawan. She's from the Sunrise Care Home. She's here to see you today,' said Hannah, gesturing towards Rawan with an elegant extension of her arm.

Eternity felt an intense heat taking over her body, rising from her toes all the way to the top of her head. This was it. They had come to take her away. Denise and Hannah had won. She was to spend the rest of her life, living with the psychologically fragile, in a massive house, where privacy was non-existent, only so that she could get better. That is what Hannah had said. But this place. It was probably a torture chamber. Eternity tried to assure herself that Hannah

and Denise had not won. That as much it was her loss, it was theirs too. They were losing a long-time friend after all, someone they had shared secrets and memories with.

‘She’s here to tell you all about the lovely care home,’ said Hannah, opening her arm and pushing Rawan along with a more-than-gentle touch on her back. ‘And look, you’ll also be making your first friend,’ she continued enthusiastically.

‘Hi. I’m Rawan,’ said Rawan, as if she had just walked through the door. She was still wearing unmatching slippers but had given up on trying to find out which one she should go for, and instead was looking upwards at the chandelier that hung from the upstairs ceiling.

Now that she wasn’t smiling so much (although there was still the hint of a smile, her lips drawn into a shallow U), Eternity noticed that Rawan had beautiful eyes, her pupils foggy. She realised that her face had broken into a smile as well, an unusual event, as for a long time her face had been concreted into expressions of misery, fatigue and despair. Perhaps the care home would be good for her. Hannah was blabbering on about something, although her mouth was moving in quick successions, her voice was mute to Eternity. Denise was standing in the corner, next to the door, looking bored to death, her head moving in a continuous up and down motion, agreeing with whatever Hannah was saying. She was continuing her observation of Rawan, and had made her way down from her face, mesmerized by her large breasts that completely obscured her waist, when a man emerged at the door.

Hannah continued speaking.

‘...and the suitcase is upstairs anyway. I’ve packed it with everything I could think of. All the essentials. Oh, hi Mr. Johnson. Glad to see you. Eternity and Rawan were just here waiting for you. They seem to be bonding.’

The man was hairless. He had no hair on his head, no beard, no eyelashes and not a single strand of an eyebrow.

‘Hello, you must be Mrs Prescott’s friend. It’s so nice to see you. Bonding well you say? That is lovely to hear. How are you?’

‘Happy that our friend’s going to get better sooner rather than later.’

‘I promise you she will,’ said Mr. Johnson, giving Hannah a wink.

Once the conversation came to a halt everyone, including Rawan, who had been staring at the ceiling all this time, turned to Eternity. Eternity’s attention was drawn to the big bold purple letters on the file that Mr. Johnson had pressed tightly against his chest.

Sunrise Care Home. All the Care your loved ones need.

Everyone must have noticed the state of alarm on Eternity's face because they all opened their mouths in unison. Before they could say anything, Eternity said:

'Who the hell is he?'

'This is Mr. Johnson,' said Hannah. 'He's got things for you to read here.' She grabbed the papers out of Mr. Johnson's arms,' and turning to Mr. Johnson, she said, 'Eternity likes reading.'

Suddenly, Eternity felt the room darken around her. She couldn't see a thing. To check if her eyes were open she patted them with the tips of her fingers, poking her damp eyeballs. Adding to loss of vision, was also a loss of hearing. She felt like she'd been placed in a windowless pitch-black room all by herself several feet underground.

She didn't know how long she had been suctioned into this realm of nothingness when the ring of a phone lifted her out of her stupor. The darkness in the room gradually cleared away and she could see and feel that Hannah had her hands wrapped tightly around her elbows and was shaking her as if she was a stuffed doll. Rawan and Denise were nowhere to be seen but Mr. Johnson had just stepped into the house holding a white solid plastic bag with a red cross in its centre. The area around Eternity's mouth, and the whole of her chin was soaked in saliva.

'Babe, are you alright? Mr. Johnson, I think she's back with us,' said Hannah.

Rawan walked out of the kitchen, holding what looked like a piece of circular bread. She was tearing tiny pieces from it and throwing them into her mouth. Brown dust clouds that smelled like cinnamon flew out from between her lips, with every attempt at chewing.

Mr. Johnson placed the solid plastic bag next to the small blue storage box that Denise used as a shoebox. The bag fell sideways onto the colourful threaded hippy-style rug, causing glitters of dust to rise, twirling and glistening in the sun's rays that seeped into the hallway from the kitchen window. He started rummaging through his backpack that he had been holding in his other hand and pulled out a form that had already been filled out. Next to the 'Name' section was written: Ethan Barton.

'How do you know my real name?' asked Eternity, staring at Hannah with desperation. Maybe this time they would give an answer.

Hannah bit down on her index finger, then and wiped her fingertips against her pink shirt, leaving a streak of saliva. 'We're your friends, right? Of course, we know.'

'But...'

'There's no buts babe. It's the truth.'

Denise slightly tilted her head, sending a signal of an unassured 'yes.'

'Babe, do you mind just going outside with Rawan until we sort a few things out with Mr. Johnson and then we'll come outside to say bye-bye.'

Eternity nodded and walked over to Rawan who was tearing the cinnamon roll into tiny pieces and making a mess in the hallway. A clutter of brown sugar and crumbled pastry lay in the centre of the carpet.

'Come on Rawan,' she said. 'Let's go outside.' She wrapped her arm around Rawan's and they walked towards the front door.

Once they were outside, Rawan threw the remainder of the mushy cinnamon roll into the row of bushes on the side of the walkway.

'I'm going to tell you something that I've not told anybody before,' she said, without looking at Eternity.

Eternity nodded.

'Every morning when I wake up I always wonder if perhaps my mum will come and visit me, or my sister, or Mahad. Or if not that, that a carer will come knocking on my door with a letter from them. But no one comes, no one sends anything. But I did receive a letter once from my mum. It was my birthday. She sent me this card which was red and had a heart right in the middle. It said happy birthday on the card, but it was obvious that the card was one that was meant to be brought by a lover to another lover, rather than a mother to a daughter. She hadn't even taken the effort to choose a proper card. And when I opened it there was this message that lacked any emotion. Happy birthday, from mum. No sign of an I love you, or I miss you. Nothing that suggested that she would come and see me soon. I remember how my hands were shaking when I read it. Possibly from anger. Definitely not from excitement. Because your hands only shake when you're angry or excited right?'

Eternity nodded and evaluated Rawan's situation, struggling not to consider it as a potential scenario in her own life in the upcoming days.

'Maybe you were never that close to begin with. Surely, she would come and visit you regularly if everything between you was OK.'

What about my relationship with Denise and Hannah? she thought to herself. Was the bond between us strong enough to entail a visit from them?

‘We did live in the same house together for 23 years,’ said Rawan, observing her nails. ‘Some sort of bond is created when you share a house for all them many years. At the very least, they would miss your absence. Don’t you think?’

Would Denise and Hannah feel my absence? Eternity asked herself. Had they even felt her presence when she was around?

‘I guess so,’ said Eternity. Rawan had not lifted her gaze from her hands, and Eternity could see her bottom lip quivering. ‘Would you like a hug?’ asked Eternity, touching Rawan’s right cheek with the tips of her fingers as she walked closer towards her.

Rawan remained silent, still looking down, her bottom lip still shaking in short swift spasms. But Eternity thought that she spotted a vague nod, so she opened her arms wide and wrapped her arms around Rawan, all the while contemplating whether she had imagined the nod because she desperately needed a hug herself. She was desperate for any kind of affection, plentiful or meagre, genuine or forced, to feel that she was human, that she existed, that she mattered.

Being several inches shorter than Rawan, Eternity placed her head in the scoop of Rawan’s shoulder blades and listened to the rhythmic pulsations of her heart.

‘May I give you a little kiss?’ whispered Rawan, her warm breath humidifying inside Eternity’s ear.

Eternity didn’t move. Her body tensed instantaneously and with it came a sharp pain in the centre her back. Rawan planted a small peck on the top of her head.

‘How do you think happy people feel?’ asked Rawan, digging her pointy chin into Eternity’s crown.

Eternity strained her mind to conjure happy images from her own life. How had she felt when she was happy? But, it didn’t take long for her to realise that no matter how deep she dug into her well of memories, there was no evidence of a happy moment in her life that could answer Rawan’s question. She just didn’t know.

‘I don’t know. I guess they’re just happy,’ she said.

Rawan tugged at her own ear lobe. ‘People with happy lives,’ she repeated to herself several times. She wrinkled up her face cheekily. ‘I hate happy people,’ said Rawan after a while.

Eternity laughed nervously and said; ‘Okay. I’ll keep a note of this, always to make sure that I’m not laughing when I’m around you.’

‘How do they manage to be so happy? I don’t understand. How is it that some people experience so many happy moments, sometimes all at one time, while others just experience nothing but misery.’

‘It’s strange,’ said Eternity.

‘It’s like Pandora opened her box only for us, so that we could be tormented over and over again. In September, my baby passed away from high fever and my partner whom I met at the care home, jumped out the window a couple of days later. Initially, they said he just broke some bones, but then he passed away. One of his ribs ripped open his stomach. I just blamed Pandora.’

Before Eternity could say anything, Hannah walked out with Mr. Johnson. Eternity swiftly unwrapped her arms from around Rawan, and lifted her head off her shoulder, hitting Rawan’s chin with the top of her head when doing so.

‘You’re all ready and set now,’ said Hannah. ‘We’ve filled in all your details and Denise is just bringing your suitcase down. We’ve packed it with the basics for now, when we visit we’ll bring all the other bits and bobs that come to our mind.’

‘Thank you,’ said Eternity, bowing. ‘You’re going to visit, aren’t you?’

‘Of course,’ said Hannah. ‘It’s all for your own good babe. Remember, you’re not well.’

‘Yes. I am not well,’ said Eternity out loud.

Rawan leaned into Eternity and pressed her damp lips onto Eternity’s cold ear. ‘It’s all lies. They may come at first but then they won’t bother,’ she whispered.

‘You’re all set and ready to go,’ said Denise, walking through the door with a massive suitcase that Eternity had never seen before. The veins in her neck bulged, forming a tangle of purple tubes.

Mr. Johnson picked up the suitcase and placed it in the boot.

‘Come on then girls. Get in the car. We better get going soon before the sun starts setting. I can’t drive when the sun’s right in my eyes. We don’t want to die before we get there,’ he said, letting out an awkward laugh, which started off loudly and then abruptly evolved into a squeak.

Rawan tugged at Eternity’s arm, pulling her towards the car. She got in herself first and shuffled along to the very right. Eternity clasped the car door’s frame, and resisted Rawan’s insistent yanks at her jumper. What if Hannah wanted to give her a hug but was not able to because she had gotten into the car too quickly?

Hannah walked up to her and placed her hand on her shoulder.

‘Remember babe, to take interest in everything they teach you there. That’s the only way you’ll be able to heal. Keep your eyes open and make use of all the possibilities for healing that are thrown your way. See something good in everybody that you meet.’

‘I promise I will,’ said Eternity, letting her arms fall to her sides.

‘Come on. It’s getting cold. You better go now. And look you’ve got Rawan here, you’re not alone. You’ve already made a friend. I’m sure she’s learned a lot, ask her questions, what better way to learn than through a friend,’ said Hannah.

‘But you and Denise are my friends,’ said Eternity, looking from Hannah to Denise who was standing in the doorway, clutching her pregnant belly.

Hannah gently lifted Eternity’s leg and guided it into the car, and Eternity automatically raised the other, finding herself unexpectedly inside. Before she could say anything, Hannah shut the door, then lifted her hand for an unenthusiastic wave. Mr. Johnson drove off, taking Eternity to her new life of psychological healing.

CHAPTER 32

Eternity looked out of the window in a state of haze. Tiny drops of rain were falling down in straight lines, filling the potholes in the road. They stopped at some traffic lights and Eternity watched as a girl dressed in absolute black, apart from her light brown boots, was washed all over with mucky water as a truck drove, perhaps on purpose, into a large puddle near the pavement she was standing on. Eternity found it comical that in one moment the girl had been waiting for the traffic lights to change in her favour in a state of arrogance, her head held up high, her nose almost pointing up to the sky, her long silky blonde hair flying backwards away from her face, revealing her beautiful high cheekbones and her perfectly arched eyebrows, and then at the next moment she was screaming with anger as if this was the worst thing that had ever happened to her. She watched as the girl pulled a strand of wet hair from her right eye and stamped her left leg as if the deafening scream was not enough to relieve her from her frustration. Then she caught Eternity staring and stuck her middle finger up at her. The light had now turned amber and Mr. Johnson pressed down on the accelerator for take-off. As they pulled off Eternity waved at the girl and blew out a raspberry. The bitch deserved it. She deserved everything that had happened to her and she deserved worse.

The cars moved in a blur, as if the world around them was fast forwarded while they proceeded in slow motion. Eternity tried to people-watch to distance herself from her reality, one which she felt was decided for her, one that she had minimal control over, but there were not many people in sight as the rain had started falling in heavy chunks, like it was being thrown down from buckets, and everybody had run into the first store they could find.

She had an unsettling feeling in her stomach, which let out noises every now and again, like a tiny person was ready to rip open her abdomen and walk out. Her stomach had bloated, causing her trousers to roll down involuntarily and gather over her belly button. She hadn't eaten for a long time and attributed the inner gurgles, which she hoped were only audible to herself, to be a result of her hunger. She really fancied the cinnamon roll that Rawan had been eating earlier on. When they reached the care home, she hoped that they had something ready for her to eat.

When they turned into a quiet side street and pulled into a sloped driveway, Eternity craned her neck and looked at the building she was going to live in for an undetermined length

of time. It was a grand building. The most striking thing about the house was that it was painted all over in violet, making it stand out from all the houses around it that were small and built of red brick. Outside, to the right of the building was an ancient-looking, rather worn-out fountain which had an indistinguishable object standing in its centre. Eternity guessed that it must have been a fish that had water spurting out of its mouth. However, there was no water in sight now. Through the glass door on the balcony she could see somebody lying down on what appeared to be a massive pink velvety sofa. She couldn't clearly see the person's face, but only a pair of shiny heeled boots and a tiny fluffy jacket were visible. The person, who Eternity could now see, was a large muscular lady. She must have heard them, because she lifted her head from the pillow and gazed towards them.

'I feel sick,' said Eternity to Rawan who was picking up plastic bags that had collected under the passenger seat of the car and placing them in a larger crumpled one.

'It's probably that you're hungry,' said Mr. Johnson, fiddling with the various buttons on the steering wheel.

'We'll go in and have breakfast now. Holly always has something ready in the kitchen,' said Rawan, tucking the larger bag under the passenger seat. 'And if you're worried around meeting new people, don't worry, they'll all love you. Nobody cares so much about how the other is in here anyway,' said Rawan. 'We all have our, you know, problems.'

'They're all accepting,' Mr. Johnson managed to shout out amongst a coughing fit. 'Come on now girls, you can go inside. I'll make sure I've got everything.'

Eternity stepped out of the car and stood with her breasts pressed against the car door, her back towards the house, waiting for Rawan to get out as well. When Rawan had stopped fidgeting with the clutter of various objects in the back of the car she stepped out too, and Eternity followed her towards the balcony door.

The woman with the shiny shoes had already lost all interest in them, and had unfurled herself across the sofa, her legs spread apart, her frilly pink panties visible between her thighs. Seated on the adjacent sofa was an elderly man who had a navy-blue blanket wrapped over his shoulders. He lifted himself up when he saw them, and with a rapid hand movement caught the blanket that was sliding off his back. Rawan pointed towards the door.

'He needs directing. Most of the people in here do. They're a bit... slow. Not that I'm not, myself,' said Rawan, her finger thrusting towards the right.

The man stared at them indistinctly, itching his crotch, as if he wanted to tear it apart, then he sat back on the sofa and diverted his gaze from them. Rawan knocked on the door, wanting to wake the man from his stupor and when she had captured the man's attention once more, she pointed towards the door again. When he did not move, she reached down into her cardigan pocket and pulled out a phone. After pressing a succession of buttons, Eternity heard the phone ring inside the house. Both the woman and the man in the room showed no reaction to the ringing. When a few minutes had passed, the woman leapt from the sofa and ran out of two mahogany doors that seemed to lead into a hallway. The phone in the house had stopped ringing and Rawan started shouting into the phone.

'Open the bleeding door Holly. I can hear you breathing into the phone. I'm going to break your bones when I get in.'

While shouting into the phone, Rawan was also knocking on the glass door, and pointing towards the entrance. The elderly man who had now stopped scratching his crotch, ignored Rawan's gesture and wrapped the blanket tighter around himself. He walked out the mahogany doors and disappeared to the right. Rawan took long strides towards the entrance, and Eternity followed at her ordinary pace.

'Holly I can still hear you. Stop ignoring me. There's literally nothing the matter with her you know. She's like a baby,' she said to Eternity. Rawan tugged at the gold door knob and banged on the foggy glass pane with her fist. She pressed her face against the pane and shouted out to 'Holly' and then to 'Graham' successively.

'Who's inside?' asked Mr. Johnson who was standing behind them with Eternity's suitcase in one hand, and his backpack in the other. 'I couldn't find the key,' he said. 'You know how I am Rawan, always losing things. We better get them to open the door.'

'It's Holly and Graham,' said Rawan.

Mr. Johnson lowered his head in dismay and pinched the tip of his nose, as if this was the worst news he'd ever received.

'I been trying but I can't seem to get their attention,' said Rawan.

'We've had it then,' sighed Mr Johnson. 'You carry on, girls. I'll go back and search the car for the key again.' He trotted off, still clasping tightly onto his backpack.

'You run to the back door.' Rawan let her arms fall to her sides. 'Sorry,' she said, 'I forgot your name.'

'It's Eternity.'

‘Eternity. That’s a nice name. Isn’t it?’

‘I guess,’ said Eternity, shrugging.

‘Anyway, Eternity.’ She emphasized the ‘Eternity’ as if she’d only just discovered the word. ‘You run to the side and see if they’re standing around the balcony door there. I can see Graham standing on the other side of the door. I’ll try and convince him to open the door for us. It might take a while.’ She puffed and tiny sprinkles flew out of her mouth and merged into the air.

Eternity jogged towards the left of the house. Contrary to the flowers and plants at the front of the building, which consisted of tall trees and abundant bright flowers, the vegetation on the side of the house were wilted. A sour stench mixed with the smell of aged faeces hit her nose. She followed the smell and behind a bedraggled bush she saw a large picnic basket. From afar she couldn’t clearly see what was situated inside the basket, but every now and again, a bright yellow dome of fluff moved from one side of the basket to the other. As she walked towards the basket, the heavenly smell of herbs trying to make itself noticed against the strong sour smell, she saw that strutting in circles inside the basket were five chicks. She bent down and attempted to pick one up, but jumped with fright as a voice behind her said:

‘Don’t touch them.’ The voice was husky and resonated in cracks. Eternity imagined it belonging to someone much bulkier and stronger than herself. She felt that there may arise a risk of attack if she didn’t obey.

She stood statue-still, her face turned away from the voice. She wasn’t ready to meet anybody new. She didn’t want to introduce herself, explain why she was here, and engage in small talk. She didn’t want to feel the need to ask whoever was behind her to introduce themselves. But she was on the spot now, there was no one around to divert the attention away from her. She gazed up at the sky and felt compelled to close her eyes as the uniformity of the white fluorescent heavens caused a stabbing pain in the back of her eyeballs. Come on Rawan, she murmured to herself. There’s an open door on this side.

‘I didn’t mean to scare you,’ said the voice. ‘I just killed some of those poor little things once upon a time and I didn’t want you to do the same.’

Eternity looked down at her jittery hands and held tightly onto her jumper’s collar to stop them from shaking.

‘I washed them one day and then laid them out into the sun to dry... and then they just died. I loved them too much.’

‘Holly why the fuck haven’t you been opening the front door?’ shrieked Rawan, who must have managed to persuade Graham to open the door. She stepped out onto the side balcony from the inside. Eternity, feeling the security of having someone familiar in her immediate vicinity, was finally able to relax, and she turned around to see for the first time the owner of the husky voice.

‘I didn’t know that is what you wanted me to do.’

It was the woman who had splayed her legs and exposed her panties to her on the sofa. She was holding a small orange in her palm, which seemed to have lost its spherical shape amongst her stubby fingers, emptying its juices onto her skirt. Holly must have realised that Eternity had been staring at the orange because she said: ‘You hungry babe? You’re not having my orange. It’s comes all the way from Florida. You know how many dollar dollar bills one orange costs?’ When Eternity did not answer she continued: ‘Well, I’m not telling you.’

‘You’re hungry, aren’t you?’ asked Rawan. ‘I’ll prepare you something to eat now and you can meet the others in the house. Not all of us are bullies.’ She spat on the floor close to Holly. A splatter of blackness flew out of her mouth and she then walked inside.

Holly, who had now squished the orange into a juicy mess, followed Rawan, and Eternity trailed after them. She kept a considerable distance to avoid the splatters of orange juice showering over her, due to Holly’s exaggerated arm swings as she strode.

The first room they walked through was the sitting area which had been visible from the front of the building. It had three yellow armchairs and two pink sofas, the armchairs embroidered with red flowers, while the sofas were knitted with yellow ones. Ahead of them were the large mahogany doors that Holly had sprinted through earlier on. As they proceeded through the doors into the hallway, Eternity noticed two closed doors to her right, with cards hooked onto their handles, swaying back and forth from the soft breeze blowing through the open front door. When she realised that one of them was about to fall off, she left Rawan and Holly’s trail and took a step towards the door, to push it back on. On it was written: *Please do not disturb*.

She tried to visualise the important tasks taking place within the rooms that unforgivingly entailed zero interruptions. Maybe these were the resting areas of the psychologically fragile who would be sitting numbly in the rooms which would potentially be dark and windowless, looking blankly around but not fully comprehending what they were laying eyes on. People who only felt pain and nothing more, who didn’t care if they were shot

dead or strangled to death because this would actually save them from the prolonged mental suffering they were experiencing. Maybe the room consisted of people who killed their own babies.

There was a massive staircase in the centre of the house, which led to an upper floor, with an oval hole in its middle that enabled a clear view of the floor below. On the upper floor, she saw two other staircases, one on either corner, with flimsy-looking metal stairs, leading up to a further third floor. Next to the two rooms with the 'do not disturb' signs was the kitchen. She stood in the doorway and counted exactly five people, all around the same age as herself, sitting around a table. Nobody was talking to or even looking at the other. They were either picking at or absentmindedly munching on the sandwich placed in front of them. A young man, sitting at the far end of the table was pinching the bread and pulling off tiny chunks, before robotically throwing them into his mouth. Eternity noticed that, once the bread was in his mouth, he did not chew but just swallowed.

Holly, Rawan and one other lady were standing in front of an empty space on the kitchen counter, all carrying out separate tasks. Holly was attempting to cut a tomato into thin circles but was instead smushing it as she had done to the orange. Its juices formed a puddle on the chopping board and slowly separated into thin paths towards the edge of the counter. Eternity watched as Holly interrupted her cutting to push back the juices towards the centre of the board. Rawan was roughly peeling a small cucumber with a silver tool that looked like a dagger, sliding it down on the vegetable's surface, and the other lady was buttering one slice of bread after the other, at times losing control of the knife and swinging it too close to Rawan's face.

'Do you know where Eternity's gone? She was so hungry. I made her a sandwich and now she's nowhere,' said Rawan, completing her chopping and throwing the dagger-like tool into the sink. 'I thought she was following us?'

'That's what I thought too,' said Holly. 'I turned around though, and she wasn't there.'

The woman sitting at the table, who along with her sandwich had also involuntarily been munching on her fingers said:

'The new girl's standing at the door.'

Eternity was shocked by the woman's remark as she was certain that the woman had not even once lifted her head from the table's surface. This brought to her mind her special powers in the House; the one's she from time to time thought had been imposed onto her and that she had accepted without questioning because she did not want to destroy the grieving

women's hopes. Did this woman have some sort of power too? If she did, then this would open up a possibility that her powers were genuine, and not constructed by those in the House.

Everybody in the kitchen turned to look at her, apart from the boy who was still picking at his sandwich.

'Hi,' said Eternity. 'I'm Eternity. That's what I like to call myself. But you can call me Eth...an if you like. Whatever you're comfortable with.'

The faces staring at her lacked any sort of response. She wasn't even sure they had heard her. Is my mind playing tricks on me? she asked herself. Have I been talking to myself merely in my mind?

'Stop telling us your life story,' said Holly. She picked up a sandwich from the counter that was wrapped up in a kitchen towel and shook it. A piece of yolk flew out of the sandwich, crumbled in mid-air and fell to the floor breaking into smaller pieces.

'You said you were hungry. We made you a sandwich and then you disappeared. You come across as quite ungrateful, don't you?'

'Leave her alone. For once just stop bullying everyone. You're going to make her self-conscious and then she's going to clam up and never speak. Like you did to poor Matt. Poor Poor Matt,' said Rawan, stroking his hair. Matt continued picking at the crust without acknowledging Rawan's comment. 'Come in, Eternity,' she continued. 'We've got your sandwich right here.' She pointed to the sandwich that Holly had placed on the table.

'I didn't mean to be ungrateful,' said Eternity. 'I was just looking around.'

She took a few steps into the kitchen and picked up the sandwich. Lifting up the top slice of bread, she quickly glanced at what was inside. The piece of egg that was now lying in the centre of the kitchen floor had left its outline on the buttered bread and all the ingredients had gathered at the bottom of the sandwich. There was tomato, cucumber and egg, as well as something she couldn't quite make out, but decided that it was probably old lettuce.

Eternity took a bite and felt a sudden jolt of pain penetrate from her tooth to the entirety of her bottom gum, as it touched the cold tomato. Just as she was about to take another bite, Matt, started shouting as if someone was causing him physical pain, although this was definitely not the case. He picked up the plate, (the crusts scattered all over the table; one landed in the plate of the girl with the 'special powers') and started hitting it against his forehead. No one seemed to take any notice.

‘What you looking at?’ shouted Holly over Matt’s persistent shrieks. ‘You’re gonna get used to all this. I know it’s too painful to hear him doing that to himself, but we’ve got nothing we can do.’

‘We just wait and see what happens,’ said Rawan.

‘Why don’t we do anything to help him?’ asked Eternity. ‘Isn’t there anyone around?’

Rawan, Holly and the lady who had been spreading butter on the bread earlier on looked at one another and let out a short condescending laugh.

‘You crazy or what?’ shouted Holly over the sound of the mixer. ‘This is not a hospital. There’s only Mr. Johnson and Jennifer. And, to be honest they don’t seem too bothered. They don’t care too much. If they’re in the room they do something. If not, and even if they hear something going on they never come to check and see what’s going in.’

Suddenly, Matt stopped his deafening scream and his persistent attempt at hurting himself with the plate.

‘There’s two different types of packages when staying here,’ said Holly. ‘So, in the first one your family pays a bit more for a bit more comfort. You get your own room. They have cameras in the room, the families get to see what their relatives are up to. The other package... you don’t even want to know about... but I’ll tell you anyway. That’s the one that we are all on in here. We share a room with a few other people, nobody comes to clean our rooms, we clean them ourselves. And, its self-catered. We cook for ourselves and all that.’ Holly puckered her lips and slapped her palms together. ‘Oh yeah, and one other thing. I would love to think that it’s the package’s fault, but we all know it’s not. No relatives come to visit.’ She scratched the back of her neck, slapped her palms together again and continued. ‘And poor Matt here... the poor soul. He’s only seventeen. He’s been here for almost a year now and nobody’s visited him. They say he’s from a wealthy family, who don’t want a child like this. It probably taints their pure blood.’ She stressed the word ‘pure’ and scrunched up her face with disgust. ‘You look at him, you think he’s stupid. But he’s really intelligent. Has all these books near his bed. Crime and Punishing. One Hundred years of solicitude or whatever they’re called.’

‘It’s *Crime and Punishment* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*,’ said Rawan.

‘That’s not the point though, is it?’ said Holly. ‘The point is getting across Matt’s intelligence.’

As Eternity was thinking of how to contribute to the conversation, Mr. Johnson appeared at the kitchen door, holding onto Eternity’s suitcase.

‘This is Ethan,’ he said.

‘She said that we can call her Eternity,’ said Holly. ‘I like that name better. It’s different. Ethan’s a boy’s name you know, and it’s sort of generic.’

‘You can call her whatever you like Holly, as long as Ethan’s happy with it. Have you met everybody Ethan?’ He had a weird way of pronouncing her name. Eat-un. Before he allowed her to respond, he asked: ‘Do you want to see where you’ll be staying?’

‘Yes,’ said Eternity, with an assertive nod.

CHAPTER 33

As she was ascending the stairs, helping Mr. Johnson carry her suitcase with an occasional push, she thought of what Holly had told her about the two separate packages; one for those who paid enough money to be given the extra care, the extra privacy, the other for those who no one cared about. She wondered whether Denise and Hannah cared enough to pay the extra cash to provide her with her own private space where she could think about where things had gone wrong and why she had ended up in such a place. Everybody seemed crazier than she was.

Halfway up the staircase, Eternity noticed the windows that were diagonally embedded into the staircase wall, the successive ones an inch or so higher than the previous. She looked outside at the tumble-down cabins scattered all over the big barren field that lay beyond the shallow bordering wall. The cabins roofs were made of thick logs placed neatly on top of a rustic bed of straw, which poked through the logs like sun-kissed wheat.

‘They’ve all been built by your friends. We get them to build things every now and then. To keep them occupied, so they don’t get up to mischief,’ laughed Mr. Johnson.

‘What are they used for?’ asked Eternity.

‘They’re not for using. They’re not strong enough to accommodate people. We make sure that no one gets hurt here.’

Having nothing else to focus on, (the stairs seemed never-ending, and they had left the windows behind) Eternity focused on her body. She became aware of the itch on the end of her nose but didn’t have the energy to lift her arm to scratch. The fact that she couldn’t conjure up the energy for even a simple itch was her own doing. She had gotten her body used to such laziness, such exhaustion, by spending her life in a state of half sleepiness, where neither her mind nor her body conducted the level of activity that was expected of them. She realised that when she thought, she only half thought and was unable to complete any of the ideas or theories that came to her mind. When she moved, she was slow and moved in the fashion of a sloth, because any movement that required a little more energy was too painful for her muscles. She decided that she wanted to change this, to be doing something with her life, something that could take her mind off the state of confusion she always lived in. She wanted to get building. She wanted to build her own cabin, like the ones she had seen.

They stopped on the upper floor landing, where there was not a single piece of furniture in sight. There were four doors on the landing, two on either side. Mr. Johnson kept glancing behind him, making sure that Eternity was following. From the hallway, Eternity, could hear a voice speaking in a monotonous, unwavering manner.

‘Who’s that?’ asked Eternity.

‘It’s just Valentina,’ said Mr. Johnson. ‘She receives letters from her brother the second Friday of every month and she likes to read them aloud.’

They walked towards the centre of the corridor, and Mr. Johnson pulled out the handle of the suitcase and wheeled it along.

‘You hear some really hilarious things from her sometimes. And at other times they’ll be something vulgar, but it’s a lot of fun to listen to. And all these interactions will be good for you too. They’ll take your mind off your own problems.’

Eternity closed her eyes, and turned her head towards the ceiling, begging the Highest Entity (she had no recollection of who had instilled her with the information that the Highest Entity was situated high above, regardless of whether the above was restricted with a ceiling, the sky or a tent), not to punish her by making her share a room with somebody who read her letters out loud in this manner. What if on certain second Fridays of the month she wasn’t in the mood to listen to a random person’s letters? And, who knew what other things she liked reading out loud?

To Eternity’s despair they turned into the room which the voice was coming from. A young girl, possibly younger than Eternity, with round cheeks, and a miniature nose was seated on the first bed out of the four in the room. She didn’t look up but continued reading and Mr. Johnson stretched out his arm and held onto the door frame, blocking Eternity from entering the room. He then turned to Eternity and placed his index finger vertically onto his lips, indicating that she should make no noise. The young girl carried on reading:

‘...and I think mama is stealing from papa Valentina. I found an unusual looking journal in the bookcase (pause) it wasn’t really unusual looking but rather one that I had not seen before and standing out amongst the other books I picked it up and noticed that there were several euros in it. (long pause) And I thought for days whether I should ask her about it or not. And then I decided that I should. And when I did she acted as if she was surprised. I told her that I knew about her money stealing and that she didn’t have to hide anything from me, because I would never tell anyone. When I said that I knew about her money stealing she gave me a

disgusted look, like I was accusing her of a deadly crime. Then I told her that I remembered because years earlier, when I was about five she made use of my childly flexibility and made me climb to the top of a cupboard where papa kept his cameras. I'm sure you remember too. There was not only cameras there of course, but also money. A large amount. You know that papa likes hiding his money in the weirdest places. Then I took the money and mama took it from me. I don't know where she put it. Anyway, let's come back to the present. A few days after I asked her about the money (pause) she told me that she now remembered where the money had come from. She said that it had probably been misplaced by one of her friends. You remember Auntie Maryam. (Of course, I do) and when Auntie Maryam was moving she gave away all her stuff to her friends and the journal ended up with mama and the money was inside. I didn't believe her of course. I've heard of friends giving away furniture before. Chairs, plates, cups et cetera, but never a journal. I don't know why she thought that she couldn't tell me the truth, but this has broken my heart and now I haven't been speaking to mama for exactly three days.' Valentina sighed, folded the letter and pecked it with the light touch of her lips. 'Finito,' she said, then jumped as she noticed Mr. Johnson and Eternity standing in the doorway.

When Valentina had turned her face fully towards the door, Eternity noticed a few lines curved under her eyes and that her skin was paper-dry, as if it had been deprived of water for a long time. The room smelled of vanilla and sour cherry and was veiled in a thin layer of smoke. Valentina had a packet that wrote **Smoking Kills** on it sitting next to her on the white duvet. Eternity observed the look of fright and embarrassment on her face; the enlarged pupils, the hint of pink on her cheeks and the slight bow to her head as she hastily picked up the packet and shoved it under the pillow.

But Mr. Johnson had already seen the gold packet, even before Valentina had realised that she had been caught. Mr. Johnson forced a cough and diverted his eyes from Valentina, as if he did not want to look at this person sitting in front of him, because the desolate stare in her eyes would stop him from feeling even the slightest bit of anger.

'I thought you quit,' said Mr. Johnson.

'I did,' said Valentina, her voice muffled by the letter that she had firmly pressed against her lips.

'I saw the packet Valentina. Don't lie to me. You know that I don't like being lied to. Now give it to me. I'm going to rip them up and throw them into the bin downstairs. And if I

catch you trying to pick them out of the bin like last time, I'm sure you know what will happen to you.'

'I only smell them Harry,' she said. 'I swear that I've not smoked since my last promise.'

'Anyway, you should still give them to me. Smelling will bring smoking. You're not giving a good impression of our institution to this lovely lady here.' He looked at Eternity and smiled without baring his teeth. 'They're not all like this,' he said. 'Just this one.'

Eternity did not know how to respond to this, she just nodded and assured Mr. Johnson that it was not a problem and that this incident did not make her feel any differently about the institution, although what her thoughts had been about the institution till that point she was not sure of. There was still a possibility that they had visited this room by chance and that she wasn't going to be sharing her days at the care home in the same room as this lady who seemed difficult to handle.

'Valentina here is going to be your roommate,' said Mr. Johnson. 'And there's also Leora,' he continued.

Eternity suddenly felt the urge to scream but suppressed it.

'I'll pop your suitcase under the bed for now,' said Mr. Johnson, bending down and pushing the suitcase under the bed. 'When Leora comes back from....' He waited for Valentina to explain her whereabouts.

'I think she's doing a poop. But I'm not sure. You can never be sure with her,' said Valentina, opening the top drawer of the desk opposite her bed, and dropping in the letter.

'When she comes back from the bathroom then, our lovely Valentina here, will introduce you to her. I'm off now... busy as you can imagine.'

As soon as Mr. Johnson was gone, Valentina wrapped her long arms around Eternity and gave her a wet sloppy kiss, right on the tip of her nose. Her mouth was soft, and her body was pudgy and comforting. Eternity let her head fall onto her puffy arms, enjoying the warmth that spread through her. Her arms fell loosely to her side. She couldn't feel them. She refused to feel any part of her body that had the potential to lift her out of her ecstasy. It was only when one of Valentina's bronze earrings fell from her ears and bounced off Eternity's thumb before falling with a tinkle, that she realised what she was doing and immediately tensed her legs to bring her back to her senses. She pressed her knees together and dislocated her arms from around Valentina's neck (she did not remember when she had done this). Valentina must have

felt the tension that Eternity had diffused into the air, because she took a step back, lifted one eyebrow, and looked into Eternity's eyes.

'Sorry,' said Eternity, her eyes flittering around the room and finally settling on a wall calendar, with a photo of a fluffy white kitten poking its head out of a flower pot on the top half. The bottom half with the numbered boxes wrote: 2013.

'I like hugs,' said Valentina. 'There's no reason to be sorry. Leora loves hugs too. We always hug.'

'That's nice,' said Eternity, not really meaning it.

'Welcome to my room,' said Valentina, with a rather formal tone, as if they had just met and the inappropriate overly-emotional touchy thing had not happened at all. 'It's your room as well now and Leora's, but I call it my room because I was here before both of you and that's what I'm used to calling it.'

Eternity had never shared a room with somebody before and she didn't know how it worked. She thought about asking her which bed she wanted to sleep in and then remembered that Valentina probably had a bed which she had been sleeping in for a long time.

'People always ask me if I've been here for four years,' said Valentina, 'but I just really like that picture, that's why I have that calendar. It hasn't been that long that I've come here. I've lost track of how long it's been, but it was after that calendar which I brought from home. A gift from my brother.'

'That's not what I thought,' said Eternity. 'Is that what happens here? You just lose track of time?'

'Don't even ask me about it,' said Valentina, ambling towards the bed at the far end of the room. Eternity followed her, pulling her suitcase along. 'I'll show you which beds are available and then you can just pick which ever you find more comfortable. One's orthopaedic and the other's not. The orthopaedic one belonged to an elderly lady that only lived here for a few days and then she died. I think her children brought her here to die. They didn't want to deal with her.'

'Is it possible that I have the one that no one died in,' said Eternity.

'But the other one's more comfortable.'

'I'd still prefer the other one.'

Valentina patted the mattress of the bed at the far end of the room. It had an ugly stripy black and white duvet cover spread over it, with mismatching pillows cases—one was plain red while the other was beige. There was a faint orange stain in the centre of the duvet cover.

‘It’s not a period stain,’ said Valentina. ‘The elderly lady that died in that bed...’ She pointed at the second to the last bed ‘...cut her hand trying to open one of her boxes on the first day when she was unpacking and then she just sat onto this bed that was closest to her at the time. And from that day I knew she’d be trouble. Then the next day she died and my thoughts about her were confirmed.’

‘I’ll have this one,’ said Eternity, sitting on the bed with the stain. ‘Anyway,’ said Eternity, not wanting to delve into the concept of death. ‘I’ll just start unpacking myself, and maybe explore a little,’ she said, drawing imaginary circles with her fingertips, as if she was outlining her own territory.

Valentina must have understood the message because she walked away without saying anything. Eternity didn’t turn to look at her, because she felt that a single glimpse may encourage her to help her with her unpacking, and all she wanted at that very moment was to be left alone. Eternity made sure that her face was completely concealed to Valentina, and started unzipping her suitcase, from which flew out a few yellowed knickers which Denise seemed to have crammed on the top.

As she started pulling out her underwear one by one and rolling them into compact cylinders, Eternity had the feeling that she was being watched by Valentina. Perhaps she was intently listening to the sounds that Eternity was making, to gather some information about her. Sounds could give away a lot about an individual’s personality.

‘Holly will be coming up soon to ask us about what we want to eat for dinner. She’s always on time,’ said Valentina from behind Eternity. ‘Always comes spot on at ten past two. We’ll wait for her and then we’ll get started.’

‘Oh yes. I met her downstairs before I came up.’

Eternity stopped packing as she was distracted by a red mug sitting on the floor next to her bed. She gazed into it and noticed that it had a dark brown crust piled up in one corner.

‘She’s the dinner lady. More like the kitchen lady really. If you try to give her a hand in the kitchen, or say something bad about her cooking, she’ll cut your throat,’ said Valentina.

Holly emerged at the door. She was wearing bright purple shorts, with a matching bright purple jumper. She knocked lightly onto their already opened door.

‘Hi Holly,’ said Valentina, without turning to look at the door. She sat on the desk chair and twisted herself from side to side, whilst chewing on something blue. ‘Just cook us whatever’s easy for you. I mean it doesn’t really matter what we eat anyway. We’re not allowed salt in any food, so it really all tastes the same.’

Holly hadn’t even dropped the question of what they wanted to eat yet.

‘Hi new girl,’ she said.

Eternity noticed that she was holding a bin-like plastic box. It was filled to the brim with soil, that had collected to one side, a few light-green shoots of grass making themselves visible amongst the almost-blackness of both the bin and soil. She could see movement in the soil. Tiny holes emerged and disappeared, and a few clumps of soil fell into the empty side of the box. Eternity focussed on it, eager to find out the source of the movement. After a short while, Eternity realised that there were hundreds of tiny maggots wriggling about. Eternity thought of a possibility that Holly did not wash her hands before she started cooking. She visualised a huge pot of the meat stew she’d tasted at the House, infested with millions of maggots, making holes in the meat and forming bubbles in the orange sauce as they jumped out for air and back in for a feast.

‘I said hello, new girl,’ said Holly. ‘You got trauma too?’

‘I’ll make my own sandwich. Thank you,’ said Eternity. Feeling that she had said this with an obnoxious tone she added: ‘I don’t want to put you through any trouble.’

Holly lifted the bin-box to her chest and with the tilt a sprinkle of soil fell to the ground.

‘Sandwich? Sandwiches are for lunch babe. You can’t eat sandwiches all day. And I swear you’ve already had one already today.’

‘I did,’ said Eternity. ‘But I like sandwiches. I’ll have one with a different filling this time.’

Eternity stared intently at the soil on the floor, trying to spot any movement. There seemed to be a slight flutter amongst the soil, but she couldn’t be sure that it was not her own mind tricking her eyes into seeing things.

Holly turned around and thinking that she was going to make her way towards the stairs, Eternity started closing the door slowly and silently so that she did not offend Holly.

‘It was that maggot filled box that put you off, wasn’t it? She always walks around with it. I think she uses it as a shield or something. First, she tries to push your buttons and then if you say something to her that she finds offensive, she’ll just throw the box right in your face.’

Newcomers always eat sandwiches on the first day when they see her.' Valentina took the blue thing out of her mouth, wrapped it into a pink piece of paper, then threw it in the bin under the table. 'She gets very offended when you don't eat her food. So, after a few days of avoiding her food, you'll see more of that bin, then you'll be forced to eat whatever she cooks, unless you want little worms crawling all over your body.'

'I'll go back to unpacking,' said Eternity.

Just as Eternity was about to start pairing the socks in the suitcase a chubby girl with a wobble on her belly walked into the room. Judging by the fact that she hadn't knocked on the door before entering Eternity decided that she must be Leora.

'Hey,' said Leora. 'Sorry I took so long.'

Valentina didn't respond at all and when an awkward silence settled over the room, Eternity timidly said: 'Hello.'

Leora didn't even bother looking at her, but stared at Valentina, her eyes on the verge of popping out of their sockets.

'Where's the best friend bracelet I gave you,' she said, lifting Valentina's arm and twisting it about. 'You gave it to her, didn't you? She's your new best friend now.'

Eternity noticed a strong sense of determination that could not be stopped no matter what in Leora, especially in the way she clenched her jaw, the muscles just under her ears jutting out like door knobs, in the great force she used while tugging at Valentina's arm, and in the tiny sprinkles of spit that flew out of her mouth and settled on Valentina's face. The idea of having so much determination scared Eternity. Maybe because she didn't have it herself and she wished she did. If she was determined for example, she could have just stood up at that moment and left the room and the building without turning back. Because when she looked at Leora she knew that she did not belong here. She wasn't as insane as Leora was. Leora's insanity was screaming to be let out. It was evident in the direct glare of her sunken eyes and the way that she couldn't control her strength when handling a fragile human body. Eternity wasn't like that. She had lost her friends, the trust of the people in the House. Nobody loved her or cared about her. She probably didn't even cross people's minds randomly throughout their daily lives. But despite this, she wasn't like Leora.

'You gave it to her, didn't you? Tell me. Tell me now,' insisted Leora.

'I said no,' Valentina shouted. 'You know I don't like wearing that. It's embarrassing. We're not twelve. People our age have young children who they buy things like this for.'

‘Holly said I’m twelve this morning,’ said Leora. ‘She said that I have the mental age of twelve-year-old. Doesn’t that count?’

‘No,’ said Valentina, rising from the chair. She tucked her shoulder-length curly hair behind her ears. ‘Just no. Listen. This is Eternity. And she’s going to be staying with us in this room. So, she’s our friend too. Say hi to her.’

‘Hi,’ said Eternity again. Leora was still glaring at Valentina. Not wanting to be part of the drama, Eternity turned around and scavenged through her suitcase looking for the pair of the pink polka-dotted sock.

‘Why isn’t she sleeping in the dead person’s bed?’ asked Leora.

‘Shut up,’ said Valentina. ‘Be nice.’

Eternity didn’t hear them speaking for a while. Occasionally, she would hear the wooden floor creaking as they moved around.

It wasn’t long before a faint voice was heard calling from downstairs. It was Holly, letting them know that food was ready. Eternity, who had finished with the unpacking, pushed the suitcase under the bed.

‘That’s Holly. It’s time to eat,’ said Valentina.

Eternity was nervous. She had just completed a round of meeting new people, introducing herself, trying to understand the nature of the people she was going to be spending an unapparent number of days, weeks, or years with. And, now she was being asked to go down for another round. She wasn’t entirely sure if she’d met everyone. In her mind, she tried to count the people that she’d already encountered. There was Holly, Rawan, Valentina, Leora, Matt, the girl who had been buttering the bread, and the girl who had informed everyone that she was standing at the door. Was there more?

‘You can go. I’ll find my way,’ said Eternity.

‘Are you sure you’re going to find your way? The place always looks bigger than it is on the first day,’ said Valentina, lifting her black cardigan from the back of the chair.

‘I’ll be fine,’ she said.

‘Oh... just leave her,’ said Leora, who was bouncing off the edge of her own bed. ‘She said she’ll be fine. Why you giving her so much attention?’

Eternity heard the door shut and when she turned around she realised that she was the only one in the room.

She waited for a while on her side of the room in case they came back. When she was sure that they would not she sat on her bed. She tried to enjoy the privacy of being alone and the serenity that came with it. She listened to the sounds coming from distant places. She heard the screech of car tires and an angry horn, in fact three successive horns with different sounds. She tried to guess how far away these sounds were coming from. She thought about how they were there, and she was here, and that she could hear them, but they couldn't hear her. She heard somebody dragging something along the gravel just under the window. She embraced these noises that she knew she would have been oblivious to if she had not been alone.

It was when her stomach growled, a lengthy angry noise that finally quietened down after a tedious squeak, that she decided to go downstairs. All the way down, she wandered who'd be in the kitchen when she got there. She imagined that Matt would be there, because she didn't think that he had the capability of leaving the kitchen table. She could almost visualise him, sitting around the table, in the same spot, banging his knife and fork together and screaming something incomprehensible. She hoped Rawan was there, because she felt that they had managed to form a different kind of bond, or maybe *she* had formed this bond because she was scared of this new place that she has been sent away to and needed someone to lean on.

When she entered the kitchen, she was both surprised and relieved that there was nobody in the room that she had not already met. Everyone turned to look at her, apart from Matt, who as she had guessed was sitting in the same spot, holding something that looked like fried roll in one hand and a fork in the other. His fingers were wrapped around the roll with such force that the orangey green filling had squirted out and a few drops had fallen onto the table.

'Oy look it's the newbie,' said the girl, who had been buttering the bread earlier on, to no one in particular. She was glimpsing at Eternity and then diverting her gaze at Matt's hand with the roll, which he kept swinging towards and away from her.

Sitting at the far end of the table was Rawan holding a yellow mug. Rawan saw her and motioned her over with a swift flick of her fingers. Eternity walked over, joyous that someone wanted to communicate with her.

'She's my friend,' said Rawan loudly, when Eternity had made her way over to where Rawan was seated.

‘Yeah right, she’s your friend,’ said Matt, who Eternity, for the first time, noticed had an innocent face, with smooth clear skin and brown hair that covered one eye. ‘You can’t be friends with someone you’ve not known for more than a month.’

‘Matt, you mind your own business. And eat what’s on your plate,’ said Rawan.

Eternity looked at his plate on which she saw something grainy mixed with a sloppy green substance. ‘Let me get a chair for you,’ said Rawan, standing up and walking over to the conservatory that was attached to the kitchen. When she had gone, Matt mouthed: ‘She’s a right bitch’ using his hand that was holding the fork to point towards the conservatory.

Rawan returned with a tattered brown chair. ‘Come on sit down,’ she said. ‘What would you like to eat? There’s plenty of everything.’

Eternity eyed all the food on the table before sitting down. There was a bowl full of bright yellow crispy balls which she had not seen before, a plate with two over-cooked fried rolls sitting in it, a bowl of salad which was mostly lettuce, and a large glass serving plate piled up with all sorts of sweet things.

Suddenly, Matt started his monotone scream again. He threw his half-eaten roll into the centre of the table. It bounced and splattered on the floor next to Eternity.

Rawan grabbed Eternity’s plate and started putting a bit of everything on it. When she was done her plate was invisible, and it looked like Rawan was carrying a circle of floating food.

‘Here you go,’ she said, ‘eat as much as you like. We’ll throw the ones you don’t eat away.’

Rawan placed the plate in front of Eternity, and when Eternity looked down at her food, she noticed that her hair was swimming in the watery beige sauce dolloped next to the rustic yellow balls.

‘That’s onion bhaji,’ said Rawan, pointing at the pastry-looking thing. ‘It’s from where I’m from originally. You’ll love it.’

Eternity had bitten into the onion bhaji and was struggling with a tough piece of onion, when Matt stopped screaming. He dropped his knife and fork onto the plate. The loud clinking made everybody freeze in mid-motion. He then rose from this chair.

‘I want to go outside,’ he said in a mellow tone.

The butter lady accompanied him out of the kitchen.

Eternity eyed the people sitting around the table. The elderly man who had refused to open the door for them a few hours ago, was trying to drink from a cup, but was obviously failing as a trail of brown liquid was dripping from his chin, down to his neck, soaking his blue sweatshirt. She had diverted her attention back to her own plate, and decided that the only way that she could chew on the bhaji was to remove the onions one by one as they were as tough, when Valentina and Leora walked in. She hadn't even noticed that they were not sitting at the table. Both were carrying identical canvas bags, their faces shiny from sweat.

Valentina let out a loud sigh and said: 'If only we had a man who would carry these bags for us.'

Eternity glimpsed at the only man in the room, who did not seem to have taken Valentina's remark personally and was patting the wet brown stains on his sweatshirt.

'You're pretty as hell,' said Leora. 'Any man would be willing to carry your bags.'

'Where are all these willing men then?' asked Valentina, taking Leora's bag and dumping both on the counter.

They started unpacking the bags, and Eternity watched as they piled several boxes of different sizes and colours on top of one another.

'Have they ordered Lexapro this week?' asked Holly. 'They had none last week, and I had to take one every two days, instead of one a day. I thought I was going to die.'

Valentina peaked into the bag. 'I think there is at least one pack in here. It's got a blue strip on its box, right?'

'Yes,' said Holly, lifting a large spoonful of pasta to her mouth.

'Here, it is,' said Valentina, pulling it out the bag and shaking it to capture Holly's attention, who was groaning from pleasure at the taste of her own food.

'Good. I'm not allowed to take the pack, am I? Jenny has to log them in first.'

'It's not like they'd know,' replied Valentina. 'They don't pay much attention, do they?'

'I'll still go by the books,' said Holly, chewing with her mouth wide open. She lowered her head towards her bowl, as a sliver of white sauce dripped down her chin. 'This pasta I made, it's good, but it's not my best. More herbs next time,' she said, her voice muffled with the sloppy mess inside her mouth.

'Yes. Yes,' said a Rawan, moving her head up and down in exaggerated motions. 'You always say that. Every single day.'

‘It’s not easy cooking a large pot. You won’t know, will you? It’s difficult to get the salt and herbs right.’

‘Well, don’t cook for an army then. Let’s count how many people at the table is actually eating your pasta.’

Rawan rose and browsed the table: ‘One. And that’s only you,’ she said, sitting back down.

She almost sat on Eternity’s lap, and Eternity lifted her hands up as a reflex to prevent her from doing so.

‘I think Leora had some, didn’t you?’ asked Holly.

‘I did Holly. It was deliiiiicious,’ said Leora, rubbing her belly in circular motions. Eternity watched as her belly wobbled like fresh jelly.

‘I bet you washed the chicken with fairy liquid again,’ said Valentina. ‘That’s why Leora liked it. She likes the taste of fairy liquid on chicken, better than ketchup for her.’

‘Delliiiscious,’ said Leora once more.

‘Hello ladies... and gentleman,’ said Mr. Johnson, standing at the kitchen door. He was smartly dressed in a brown suit, white shirt and a plain shiny green tie. ‘I see you’re having a feast. Is it all for our new member?’

‘Not really,’ said Holly. ‘She don’t speak much. We forgot she’s even here.’

‘That’s not very nice,’ said Mr. Johnson. ‘Everybody’s different Holly. We need to learn to accept and welcome everybody no matter their differences. You like making your food, I see you’ve made something again, and she may not like speaking.’

‘Well she doesn’t like my food, so I don’t like her,’ said Holly.

Mr. Johnson ignored Holly’s remark. He shook out the paper that he was holding.

‘We’re all going to have a puzzle session this evening,’ he said. ‘So, I’m hanging this here, in case there’s someone that’s not here at the moment. I see that there’s a couple of you missing. Just let them know when you see them. He took two balls of white tac out of his pocket and pressed them firmly onto the corners of the paper, before sticking the poster up on the door. ‘See you in a couple of hours then, ladies and gentleman,’ he said, walking away in a hurry.

Everyone sat down quietly, staring at their plates, apart from the old man who seemed to be gnawing on some sort of food.

‘He’s a liar,’ said Leora, breaking the silence. ‘He always says he’s going to be there, but he never don’t show up.’

‘It’s best that he doesn’t turn up, anyway,’ said Rawan, sliding the leftovers from a few abandoned plates into an empty bowl. ‘He’s always spreading his negative energy.’

‘I like him,’ said Eternity. She held her breath immediately after she had uttered these words from the shock of hearing her own voice after a prolonged period of silence. She prayed to God that no one had heard her, especially Rawan, who she felt close to, and who she never wanted to contradict in this way in front of everyone.

An awkward silence settled over the table, and everyone glimpsed at one another, mouths wide open.

‘She spoke,’ said the elderly man, hitting what seemed like a bare bone his plate several times, until it flew out of his hand and landed somewhere in the hallway. ‘It’s her...look,’ he said, pointing at Eternity.

‘Yeah it was her who said that. And look what she’s saying. She’s a traitor. She likes Mr. Johnson,’ said Leora, looking at Valentina for approval.

‘Be nice,’ said Valentina. At first Eternity couldn’t be entirely sure if this statement was directed to her or to Leora, because Valentina had her eyes locked onto Eternity’s and was resisting to divert them. It was only when Valentina turned around, looked at Leora, and uttered a delayed ‘Lee-Lee’ that she understood that the remark was not meant for her.

‘You haven’t been here long enough to see their true faces,’ said Rawan. ‘Is anyone having any of this potato salad?’ she asked, extending the plate towards the centre of the table. ‘Every single one of them in the management is the devil in human form. I mean, trust me, it’ll only take you a week to see.’

‘I will, I guess,’ said Eternity, gazing at the withered onion pieces on her plate.

‘She don’t really mean it, Rawan. She’s not looking at you. It’s coz she don’t believe in you,’ said Leora, plunging her whole hand into a small tub of nuts.

‘Shut up, Leora,’ said Rawan. ‘You need to stop bullying anybody that comes to share a room with you. No wonder that woman died. God knows how much you bullied her, and her heart gave way.’

‘Wo,’ said Holly. ‘That’s inappropriate. I don’t want that at my table.’

‘And you Holly stop interfering in things that are none of your business,’ said Rawan, walking over towards the sink with the leftover-filled plate.

As everybody around the table threw insults at one another, apart from the elderly man who had sat back in his chair with a proud grin on his face, a tall girl with lanky legs and gangly arms, knocked on the kitchen door.

‘Sorry to disturb your discussion ladies,’ said the girl, ‘but you’re being too loud, and I can’t concentrate on my work.’

‘Hi Jenny,’ said Holly, smiling like Eternity had never seen her smile before. ‘I’ve made some pasta, and no one seems to have touched it because they’re jealous of my abilities. Do you want to try some?’

Jenny was staring at the boxes of medication piled up on the counter.

‘Jenny. Some pasta?’ asked Holly.

‘No, thanks honey. I’m sure it’s delicious. But I don’t eat meat. I’m a veg,’ said Jenny, flicking her pen back and forth.

‘That’s bullshit,’ said Holly, so loudly and with such force that she was out of breath by the time she uttered the last syllable.

Jenny coughed and cleared her throat. ‘Have the pills arrived? I see that you’ve already unloaded them. You’re not supposed to do that ladies. You should know that by now. Whoever unpacked them now needs to pack them back and bring them to my office. And don’t dare take a single one out before I log them into the system,’ said Jenny, shaking her finger, as if she was scolding a child. ‘I want them with me ASAP,’ she said, swinging around, and ambling away.

‘That’s Jenny,’ said Rawan, sliding the leftovers into a white plastic bag near the sink. ‘She’s our secretary, deals with all the paperwork and things, and she’s also supposed to be a carer. But, if you ask me, she’s not qualified at all. She’s a bitch.’ She whispered the last three words.

Everyone around the table nodded in unison.

‘Anyway people, if you’ve all finished, then you can all go your separate ways and do your own things. We’ll all come together again at puzzle time,’ said Valentina. She glanced at the poster on the door. ‘At six o’clock.’

The elderly man, Leora, Valentina and Holly left the room, not bothering to, at the very least, place their plates into the sink. Only Rawan and Eternity remained in the kitchen.

‘Normally I wash the dishes,’ said Rawan. ‘You want to help me today?’

‘I can do,’ said Eternity.

The table was a complete mess. There were grimy cups, forks and spoons with chunks of food that had been tasted, but not consumed, and crumbs scattered here and there.

‘Where do I start?’ asked Eternity.

‘Just pass me the cups first,’ said Rawan, pouring a little of the yellow washing-up liquid onto a beaten sponge.

Eternity had just put two cups on the kitchen counter, when they heard a cry from the hallway.

‘They wrote something bad on the wall about me in the toilet,’ sobbed Leora, letting out occasional shrieks.

‘Oh gosh. It’s Leora again. She comes up with such things every now and then,’ said Rawan, rinsing her hands and then wiping them on the red tea-towel.

Rawan made her way towards the hallway, and Eternity followed.

Out in the hallway, Leora was standing inside a circle of people, her face the colour of sun-kissed tomatoes. She kept pulling viciously at her hair from either side, and crying, although Eternity could not see any tears running down her face.

‘They wrote something bad. Someone wrote something bad about me.’

Jenny was leaning into Leora’s face and pressing her palm against her mouth to stop her from screaming.

‘It doesn’t matter what they wrote. Just because they wrote it doesn’t make it true,’ said Jenny, clenching her jaw. ‘There’s no need to take what other people say about you seriously.’

‘But I don’t know who I am,’ cried Leora. ‘That’s why I believe everything everybody says.’

‘What did they write? Tell me now,’ said Jenny.

‘They wrote that I stink like a rotten egg’s been thrown onto a week-old can of beans thrown onto the shit of a tiger.’

Eternity, who had become completely blind to Rawan’s presence directly in front of her, hit the back of her head on the kitchen door’s frame from the surprise of being spoken to by Rawan.

‘That’s what she’s always like. She makes things up and then when you go to check if what she’s saying is true, she finds an excuse and changes the subject. She never admits that she’s lying.’

‘I want to show you,’ shouted Leora. ‘Come with me I show you.’ She pulled at Jenny’s arm.

‘I promise I’ll have a look later. But I’ve got things to do now,’ said Jenny, yanking her arm away from Leora and pressing down on the handle of the room with the ‘Do not disturb sign’. ‘But I will look. Promise. Go outside and find Valentina. She’ll take care of you until I’m done,’ she continued before disappearing into the room.

Leora wiped at her face with her sleeves, then dawdled towards the front door, rocking from side to side like a penguin.

CHAPTER 34

‘Is everything ok?’ asked Eternity to Valentina and Leora who were sitting side by side outside on a metal bench with puffy white and green striped cushions. Valentina had her arm around Leora who had rested her head on Valentina’s shoulder. Valentina looked up at her, unable to lift her head completely, as her hair had been caught under Leora’s head. She didn’t speak but just moved her lips. It took Eternity a while to understand that she was trying to tell her something that she didn’t want Leora to hear. Eternity shrugged to let her know that she hadn’t been able to follow her lips the first time. Valentina moved her lips again in exaggerated motions. Eternity stared intensely at the dark hole between her lips and the syllables it was trying to draw out.

‘Called her stinky. Up in the bathroom,’ read Eternity.

‘I know,’ said Eternity, out loud. ‘I’m sorry.’

Leora lifted her head off Valentina’s shoulder, and stared into Eternity’s eyes. Eternity could see that they were consumed with hatred. Not the kind that could be taken lightly. She was expecting Leora to pounce on her, knocking her to the ground, before wrapping her chubby fingers around her throat and strangling her.

‘Of course, you know,’ said Leora. ‘It was you who done it, wasn’t it? I should have known. It never happened till you came.’

Eternity, despite knowing how unreasonable Leora was being still felt the need to explain herself. ‘It wasn’t me. I was in the kitchen. When did I go to the bathroom?’ she said, shaking her hands in front of her face erratically.

‘No,’ shouted Leora. ‘It was you. I knew you were horrible when I first saw you.’

Her fingers were tightly wrapped around Valentina’s upper arm, and she must have been pinching at Valentina’s skin, because Valentina was unsuccessfully trying to unwrap Leora’s fingers.

Eternity could not think of anything else to say. She thought of death, and she visualised herself dying under Leora. Being strangled, being stabbed, being beaten to death. She thought about not being able to return to the House. Not being able to see Denise and Hannah again. Had the elderly lady, who had shared a room with Valentina and Leora for a single night, died of a naturally occurring heart attack as Valentina had told her? Or had Leora murdered her?

She looked at Leora, whose skin had broken out into blotches of pinks and reds. Her eyes were wide open and unblinking, tiny purple veins running through the white. She wasn't sure why she didn't just leave. But, she wanted to believe that it was out of respect for Valentina, because she was certain that once she left, Valentina would have to put up with Leora's tantrum, her ear-splitting shrieks, her tearless sobs.

'It was you and no one else,' said Leora. 'I don't want you living in the same room as us. Me and Valentina already have our own space, there's no more to share with another person.'

'Stop it,' said Valentina, rubbing at her arm which she had finally managed to free from Leora's grip. 'This is nonsense Leora. You always do this when someone new comes to stay with us. For once be nice to people. You can't only have me. You need to make other friends too.'

'But I have Matt, too,' said Leora. 'He always says how much he likes me.'

'Well, there's about ten people living in this house and two out of ten is not good enough.'

'And now I'm only going to have Matt,' sobbed Leora, 'because this whore here,' she pointed at Eternity, 'is going to steal you from me.'

'No, there's no way that I can be stolen because I don't belong to anyone,' said Valentina slowly. 'She is going to be my friend as much as you are.'

Suddenly, Leora rose from the bench, plunged her hand into her sweatshirt pocket and pulled something out. Without losing any time, she lifted her arm over Eternity's head, the object concealed within her fist. Eternity instinctually lifted her hands up over her head and kept them there. She didn't know what Leora was holding but she knew that her meaty arm would be enough to knock her unconscious. Without moving, she gazed up at Leora's hand, and saw that what she had swiftly removed from her pocket was the same tool that Rawan had been using to peel the cucumber earlier on.

'Oh my goodness,' shouted Eternity. 'You lunatic. God. No wonder no one likes you.' Then she scurried into the kitchen and closed the door behind her, pressing her whole weight onto it with her bottom, in case Leora followed.

After a few minutes of solace in the kitchen, she glimpsed through the kitchen door's glass panel and saw that the residents of the home had gathered around Leora who was kneeling on the floor, slapping herself rhythmically in the face. Holly had grabbed Leora by the waist

and was trying with all her might to lift her off the ground. Rawan and the butter lady were standing over her, their mouths moving, although Eternity could not hear what they were saying. Valentina had knelt down in front of Leora, her index finger moving up and down rapidly. The elderly man and Matt were standing side by side below the balcony, the former patting his belly, while the latter moved his lips and stamped his feet simultaneously.

It didn't take long for Mr. Johnson to step out of the room that Jenny had escaped into. He walked with a slight hunch towards the door, and when the crowd saw him they all stopped what they were doing, apart from Leora who had now upgraded her slaps into punches.

Eternity felt angry. She felt bad for calling Leora a lunatic.

She walked out through the conservatory and out of the back door, which led her into a walled lawn at the rear of the building. As she ambled away from the care home, she felt herself shrinking, getting smaller, as if her existence depended on her place within the home.

She was about to sit on the back wall of the lawn when she heard someone calling her from the conservatory. When she turned around, she saw that it was Jenny. Eternity couldn't quite hear what she was saying, as the wind was carrying away her voice.

'What?' Eternity shouted.

Jenny pointed to the side of the house, indicating the main door.

Eternity strolled back to the building. When she got closer, Jenny said: 'Mr. Johnson wants to see you, and now would be best. Come on hurry up. He can't wait for you all afternoon.'

'This is as fast as I can walk,' snapped Eternity. 'Is it about Leora?'

'Well, of course it's about her. What else was it going to be about?' Jenny was biting onto the lid of her pen.

'Is Leora going to be inside?'

'No, Mr. Johnson's made sure that you don't come into contact for now,' said Jenny, tucking in the chairs as they walked through the kitchen.

When they reached the hallway, Jenny knocked on the door with the 'Do not disturb sign'.

'Come in,' said Mr. Johnson.

'In you go,' said Jenny, pushing Eternity into the office.

Eternity opened the door, and entered the room cautiously, not entirely trusting Jenny's remark that Leora would not be around.

‘Come in. There’s nothing to be scared of. I’m not going to give you detention,’ laughed Mr. Johnson heartily.

The first thing that caught Eternity’s eye in the room was Mr. Johnson’s desk, which was filled with piles of papers, not a single square of wood visible on the top. A large pink lamp was placed on one side, and was on, despite it being the middle of the day.

‘You may sit down,’ he said, gesturing towards a leather seat with a deep dent from a sizeable derriere.

‘I didn’t do anything,’ said Eternity, seating herself.

‘You must have done something,’ said Mr. Johnson, taking his blazer off and hanging it behind his chair. ‘Leora is a hard person to get along with and she does moan sometimes, but I’ve never seen her do that before. You must have done something different to her. Pressed her buttons.’

‘She was trying to kill me,’ said Eternity.

‘Leora wasn’t always like this,’ said Mr. Johnson, seating himself at his desk. ‘I heard that you called her a lunatic, but she wasn’t always like this. Not a lot of people know this but she’s my sister’s daughter. A lovely girl she was, until she had this horrible accident that damaged her brain. And calling someone a lunatic in a place like this is unacceptable. How would you feel if someone called you something like that? I’m sure you wouldn’t like it. People here are sensitive. Their brains are delicate, you can’t be going around saying things like that.’

‘But she was trying to kill me,’ repeated Eternity. ‘It was something I said in a moment of anger.’

Mr. Johnson switched the lamp off and then back on again.

‘I know that you’ve been through certain things too, and that’s why you’re here, but I can see that you’re mature enough to understand that Leora is different. I’m going to call her in a bit and you can talk and sort things out in front of me. You’re going to be staying in the same room. I can’t be going to bed every night feeling that you’re going to be strangling each other to death.’

‘I have no such intentions,’ said Eternity. ‘But I can’t say the same about Leora.’

Mr. Johnson swiftly pushed aside the papers that were piled on the phone with the back of his hand, picked up the handset and pressed down on the dusty buttons without taking a single glance at the phone.

‘Jennifer can you send Leora to my office please?’

Jenny must have said something that Mr. Johnson disapproved of, because he puffed with such force that a few pieces of papers flew off the table.

Not long after there was a knock at the door. Even before Mr. Johnson had a chance to invite the owner of the knock in, Leora opened the door, and dived into the room.

‘Yes,’ she said bluntly, as if Mr. Johnson had put her through a great amount of burden by making her walk to his office.

‘Come in Leora and close the door behind you please. We don’t want anyone listening,’ said Mr. Johnson.

Leora didn’t listen to Mr. Johnson, but instead let herself fall into the chair in the corner of the room, the farthest area from Eternity.

‘Jennifer can you close the door please?’ shouted Mr. Johnson. The door shut shortly after.

‘Now,’ he said, grunting, ‘I want both of you to make peace. You’re going to be staying in the same room for a long time and you need to learn to get along. It’s also not fair on Valentina. She doesn’t have to put up with all this nonsense.’

Neither Leora, nor Eternity gave any response. Eternity stared out through the thin white curtains through which she could see tiny black birds flying to and fro in front of a clear blue sky.

‘Come on girls,’ said Mr. Johnson. ‘I’m not letting you go until you promise that you’ll at least leave each other alone.’

Eternity glanced at Leora from the corner of her eye. Surprisingly she did not have any bad feelings for her. Although, she thought that she was going to feel contempt and anger due to her attempt to attack her, she instead felt nothing but pity. She pitied her for lacking the ability to control her anger and because she did not seem like somebody who could predict the consequences of her actions. She probably did not understand the fragility of the human body. Eternity noticed that there was a lengthy tear at the collar of Leora’s shirt, and a tiny bump on her right temple. Then, the row of white marks on her wrists caught her attention.

‘I’m so sorry that I called you that thing,’ said Eternity, staring down at Leora’s ugly brown shoes, the soles having separated from the top revealed her short chubby toes. ‘I didn’t mean to. It just came out. It wasn’t anything that I was even thinking of.’

‘OK,’ mumbled Leora, not lifting her head. She scrunched her face up into a pout.

‘Good,’ said Mr. Johnson. ‘Well done Eternity. I’m very proud of you. Now you can both go.’

Eternity waited to hear Leora exit the room, before she herself attempted to stand up. She heard the door’s handle squeak, and rose to follow Leora, when Mr. Johnson said: ‘Oh ladies, puzzle night is cancelled. I don’t think we can have fun after what happened. I need to fill in an incident report form about all this anyway, which will keep me from attending. No me. No puzzle night. So, make sure you let all the others know. I don’t want them waiting.’

CHAPTER 35

‘What did Mr. Johnson say?’ asked Rawan, as Eternity walked into the kitchen where the inhabitants of the home were seated. ‘Come sit down.’

‘I’m OK here,’ said Eternity, holding onto the door’s frame.

‘Not good things,’ said Leora. ‘Puzzle night is cancelled.’

Everybody tutted, sighed and stared at each other.

‘Why is cancelled?’ asked Matt.

‘We may as well all go to bed then people,’ said Holly. ‘There’s no point in staying up. What we gonna do anyway?’ She glanced at Eternity and rolled her eyes.

‘No sleep,’ shouted Matt.

‘I think Holly’s right,’ said the Graham. ‘It’s getting late anyway. I can do with some sleep.’

‘You’re an old sod that’s why,’ said Valentina. She glanced at the clock above the fridge. ‘It’s only six.’

‘Yeah come on then. Let’s all just get to bed,’ said Rawan, rising from her seat.

‘Maybe if some people can keep their mouths shut we can have a puzzle night next week,’ said Holly.

‘Told you she’s evil,’ said Leora, walking towards Valentina and standing behind her.

They all stood up at once, apart from Matt who started banging his head onto the edge of the table. His face had a neutral expression, showing no sign of pain. He grabbed his calves, the two back legs of his chair lifted off the ground, and before Eternity could grab him, he hit his face on the table and landed on the floor.

Nobody showed any sign of disbelief, only Holly bent down to pick him up.

‘I know you don’t want to go to bed Matt but stop throwing yourself all over the place all the time. I mean, if I die, they’ll be no one else to pick you up,’ said Holly. As she held him from under his arms and pulled her face turned bright pink, but his bottom barely left the floor. ‘Come on be a good boy now. Holly loves you and you know that,’ she said.

As soon as she said this, Matt stood up by himself and after pressing the knuckles of his thumbs into the scoops of his eyes, he looked at Holly and let his head fall onto her spongy breasts. Holly stroked his head, while he drooled over her breasts.

‘Come on people you go ahead, and we’ll follow from behind,’ said Holly, still stroking Matt’s head.

They all walked out of the kitchen and made their way up the stairs in silence, each of them dragging their feet.

Eternity glanced down and saw Holly and Matt only just starting their climb, Matt’s head bobbing up and down with every step.

‘Goodness gracious me,’ said Holly, exasperated. ‘I can feel you drooling on me and I don’t like it. Come on now, lift your head up. You can walk those stairs up yourself.’

Everyone had reached the landing apart from Eternity who stood as still as a statue, her fingers wrapped around the metal rails of the banister, watching Holly and Matt.

‘Walk,’ said Holly to her, when there was only a single step between them. She flicked her arm as if she was shooing a dog, not even bothering to look at her. Eternity stared at the wetness on Holly’s breast which had encircled her nipple. Matt lifted his head and wiped the saliva trickling down the corner of his mouth with the collar of his shirt.

‘Why no puzzle?’ he asked, looking at Eternity.

Eternity didn’t know what to say. ‘Because of me,’ she said, when the silent staring had become too awkward. Then, she turned around and climbed the remaining few steps.

‘At least you know,’ murmured Holly.

When Holly and Matt finally climbed the last of the stairs, everyone wished each other good night. They shook hands like they had newly met and gave each other hugs like this was their last night together. Even Valentina and Leora hugged each other, even though they were going to the same room. Eternity was only hugged by Matt, and she couldn’t quite concentrate on giving him her full affection, as she was more concerned about the potential drool that could very well be leaking down her back. Gradually his arms tightened around her ribs, and Eternity was in so much pain that she held her breathe and started praying that he would let her go. Most of them had gone to their rooms. Only Matt, Eternity, and Valentina, stood in the centre of the landing.

‘Matt. Matty boy,’ whispered Valentina, tapping on his shoulder. ‘It’s bed time Matty. Come on let go now.’

‘He’s crushing me! Help!’ said Eternity, her body tense from terror, as she did not believe she would make it alive till the end of the night. Mushed organs were going to be her end.

Graham came out of the room opposite Eternity's, dressed in a navy and white striped pyjama.

'Oh, for heaven's sake boy. Leave the girl alone. You're going to scare her away and she's only just got here.' Graham ambled towards them and pinched Matt's arm.

'Soft,' said Matt, loosening his arms around Eternity and stepping away. 'Feels good.'

'Ok you can carry on hugging her tomorrow, but that's enough for today. Mr. Johnson's going to be up here in a second and you know what happened last time.'

Matt looked into Eternity's eyes. Their faces were so close that Eternity could feel a puff of warm air coming from his mouth and settling on her face with every word he spoke.

'Promise I hug you tomorrow,' he said.

'Yes, you can,' Eternity assured Matt, glad to finally be breathing.

'Ok,' he said and held Graham's hand.

'Well good night ladies,' said Graham, smiling at them, not a single tooth in sight. 'Make sure you sleep well. Mr. Johnson normally wakes us up at five for an early breakfast, new girl.'

Eternity thanked him and followed Valentina who had already made her way towards their room. Eternity took slow, short steps, as she was hesitant about whether to enter the room or not. Could she trust to be closed into a confined space with the person who had attempted to attack her? She glanced through the door and saw that Leora had already made herself comfortable under her duvet. Her arms were tucked under her t-shirt, trying to remove her bra. She had a prominent frown on her face, which caused her eyebrows to droop halfway down her eyes. On the bed closest to the door, Valentina had slipped herself onto the mattress, pulling the duvet up to her ears. Her body rose and fell calmly, as if she'd already fallen asleep.

Digging her nails into her palms to distract her attention from Leora's presence, Eternity tiptoed towards her bed. About halfway there a beige bra, the cups almost as big as her head, flew into her path. She stepped over it, climbed onto her bed, pulled with all her strength at the duvet whose sides had been firmly tucked under the mattress, and slid under it, relieved that she had managed to reach her destination without another attack.

From her bed she could clearly see the outside, the piece of string that had been stuck in the branches of a tall mature tree, a crescent moon shining behind the small clouds, and the clumsy cabins that the residents of the home had built in the distance, sprayed all over with vibrant graffiti. She was pleased that she had chosen this bed, glad that she could entertain

herself by observing the mysterious ways of the dark, on those long sleepless nights. She was certain that tonight would be one of them.

‘Don’t forget to take your pills,’ murmured Valentina. ‘Otherwise you won’t get no sleep. On the bedside table Eternity,’ she added.

Eternity gazed down at the bedside table, on which sat a tiny purple pill in a small crystal tub. Without questioning, she picked it up, placed it on her tongue and when a bitter taste dispersed inside her mouth, she swallowed it.

‘Night,’ said Leora, closing her lamp and letting her head fall onto her pillow.

‘Good night,’ said Eternity after a while, when Leora was snoring rhythmically through both her mouth and nose.

CHAPTER 36

She couldn't recall falling asleep, but when she woke up there was a sharp pain in the back of her head, because she had drifted off to sleep with her head resting on the bedframe. A thick crust had sealed her eyes, and she was unable to open them. She pinched the crust, pulled it away in a stringy line, circled it between her fingers and then wiped it on the side of the mattress. The heaviness in her head travelled down to the top of her neck, and she opened her eyes abruptly, certain that she would find Leora standing beside her, with her stubby fingers wrapped around her neck, eager to take revenge for what had happened earlier.

But Leora was fast asleep, smiling, her face half-concealed by a shadow. She heard the engines of cars fading away, before being replaced by new ones. Valentina sneezed and rolled towards Eternity, her palms pressed together and tucked under her ear.

Eternity closed her eyes and started counting, trying to put herself to sleep, this time her head sinking into her fluffy pillow. Suddenly, she heard a crinkling, as if someone was rummaging through a plastic bag, accompanied by the occasional thumps of footsteps. She opened a single eye, and without moving her head, she glanced towards the foot of her bed where the noise was coming from. There was figure moving around, a large white binbag thrown over its shoulder.

She took a quick sideways glance towards Valentina and Leora and saw that they were both asleep. The figure grew in size as it dawdled closer to her, before stopping as it reached the head of her bed. The strong moonlight reflected off the figure's bald head and dazzled her. It was Mr. Ahdub, the diamonds of his hooped earrings twinkling.

'Hello Eternity,' he said, looking down at her.

Eternity sat up and smiled. She was happy to see a familiar face but was equally terrified because she was uncertain whether he was real or a figment of her imagination. Was she dreaming? The first question that popped into her mind, was how he had managed to get into the house. But this question had no importance because he was here now, standing right in front of her.

'Are you OK, my dear Eternity? You look ever so shocked. I thought you'd have been expecting me, so I thought I'd just turn up and see how you're doing in your new place.' He chuckled and dropped the binbag on the floor.

It was strange being spoken to like this, thought Eternity. In this tender, genuinely concerned way. Finally, someone who cared. She looked back up at Mr. Ahdub who was staring down at her inquiringly. She didn't know what to say. In fact, she didn't want to speak because she felt that her single word would be enough to break the magic in the room.

'Eternity? You're not sleeping? Your eyes are open,' said Mr. Ahdub, itching his belly.

'I'm awake,' whispered Eternity.

'Good, because I've come to take you away,' Mr. Ahdub held out his arm.

'I can't leave,' murmured Eternity, rubbing her forehead with her fingertips. 'I'm here to get better.'

'There's nothing the matter with you, my dear. You're just different.'

'But different people can't be happy.'

'So, you're going to let them play with your mind,' bellowed Mr. Ahdub. The wind outside hit the windowpane, letting out an angry whistle.

'Shhh. You'll wake them up.'

'Nobody can hear us,' said Mr. Ahdub, hunching down towards Eternity. 'You have to come with me Eternity. There's people that are waiting for your return.'

Eternity was taken aback. Were Denise and Hannah missing her already?

'Who?' asked Eternity. A drop of saliva fell onto her forehead from the corner of Mr. Ahdub's mouth, and she wiped it away with the back of her hand.

'Well, my deary. That's a surprise. You'll only see when you come with me. Come on now let's go.'

Eternity imagined herself walking alongside Mr. Ahdub out of the front door and into the outer world.

The pigeons started cooing outside the window, as the first rays of the sun pierced upwards through the clouds in steep spikes. She didn't know what time it was, but no doubt Mr. Johnson would send Jenny to wake them all up for an early morning breakfast soon.

Mr. Ahdub cocked his head to one side then the other, waiting for a response from Eternity. Ignoring him was easy for Eternity as she was sure that he was just a part of her imagination. She was insane after all. That's why she was here. To descend back into the real. What would Leora and Valentina think if they woke up and saw her talking to herself, staring intensely into thin air? She turned to look at Leora, whose cheek was smushed into her pillow.

'Come on my deary,' said Mr Ahdub, pulling at her arm.

‘I’m not coming,’ said Eternity, yanking her arm away. ‘I don’t want to come. You’d better go. Mr Johnson will be up soon.’

‘No one can see me,’ whispered Mr. Ahdub. ‘Don’t worry, we’re fine.’

He pushed the binbag that he had dropped onto the floor with the tip of his bare foot.

‘What is that?’ asked Eternity, bending over to take a closer look. The bag had been packed to the fullest. There was a tear in it, and a few things had dispersed over the carpet.

‘Your clothes,’ he said harshly, as if she was missing the obvious.

‘Did Denise give them to you?’ she asked.

‘No, not Denise. Betty,’ he said, turning away from Eternity.

‘Betty?’ Eternity asked, surprised. How did Mr. Ahdub know Betty?

Before she could beg him for an answer, he was already halfway across the room taking baby steps. Eternity wanted to call to him, and she opened her mouth to do so but remembered that she was not alone in the room. They may have not been able to hear and see Mr. Ahdub, but there was no doubt that she herself was real. She pinched her arm to make sure and yelped as the pain shot all the way to the back of her calf.

Mr. Ahdub stepped out into the hallway and was out of sight. Should I go after him? she thought to herself. This was probably her last chance of escape. He surely wouldn’t come back to somebody who had rejected a kind offer of being saved from this house full of crazies. And there were people waiting for her, yearning for her return. That’s what he had said. She didn’t want to overthink too much, because she knew that once she did she would lose all courage of wandering out the front door of the care home, so she leapt out of her bed and raced across the room. Initially, she thought that Mr. Ahdub had disappeared with the same haste as his appearance, but she saw that he was at the bottom of the stairs. She felt lightheaded and weightless, as if she was floating forwards in mid-air. Mr. Ahdub stopped when he neared the entrance door and turned towards the light filtering through the window in the sitting room. He seemed to be gazing down at his bulbous belly, trying to button his shirt that had come undone.

‘Mr. Ahdub,’ whispered Eternity, when she was halfway down the stairs.

Mr. Ahdub turned his head slowly and smiled at her. One of his front teeth was missing.

‘I’m coming with you,’ she said, glancing at the stairs to make sure she did not trip over, and then looking back up at Mr. Ahdub to ensure he did not disappear.

‘Good,’ he said, taking a carrot out of his shirt pocket, and biting down on it viciously.

‘You better hurry up though. They may not be able to see me, but they can see you.’

‘Where are we going?’ she asked, once she was on the landing.

‘Does it really matter? I’ve got a car waiting outside deary,’ he said. Having finished the carrot, he dropped the green stalk into his pocket and patted it down with his hand.

Mr. Ahdub opened the door and Eternity followed him. They made their way down the stairs, along the patio and out the front gate.

‘Wait,’ whispered Eternity, exasperated. ‘We haven’t shut the door.’

Mr. Ahdub chuckled. ‘It’ll close on its own deary,’ he said.

And as soon as he’d finished speaking, Eternity heard a gentle tap, and when she turned to glance at the house, the door was shut.

There was a bright orange car parked just outside the front gate, which looked in desperate need of some care. Its paint was missing in several patches, and even in the dark Eternity could see copper rust glistening like dying stars.

‘Come on then. Settle in,’ said Mr. Ahdub, climbing in himself.

The interior of the car was overall quite clean, with not a single piece of clutter in sight. Mr. Ahdub adjusted the mirror, so Eternity was always in his view, coughed, hitting his chest as he did so, and then started the car.

Eternity could feel Mr. Ahdub staring at her through the mirror. She deliberately avoided his eyes, pretending that she was eager to see what was out of the window, craning her neck upwards and around, although it was so dark, she couldn’t make out anything apart from squares of blackness, that could have been bottomless pits. Suddenly, she felt hot and flustered, as a tingling invaded her forehead and face. She pulled her hair to one side and draped it over her right shoulder. Even her toes were sweating.

‘Are you ready?’ asked Mr. Ahdub.

Eternity nodded and then realised that she did not know what she was supposed to be ready for.

‘What for?’ she asked, still looking out of the window.

‘I’m taking you where you want to be.’ Although she could not see his entire face, she could tell that he was smiling from the squint of his eyes and the small sacks that bulged out under them.

‘You know where I want to be? I never told you where I want to be. I’m not even sure I know.’

‘But you know that I know everything, don’t you?’

They drove off, a thick mist of blackness, rose out from under the car and curtained the back window. Mr. Ahdub turned the corners with such urgency and force that Eternity couldn't stop her head from being thrown from side to side. Thankfully, when they got to a busy road with shops aligned on either side, he slowed down.

They stopped at some traffic lights and Mr. Ahdub turned to face her.

'How are you feeling, my little one?' he asked her, tapping his fingers on the steering wheel.

'Good,' said Eternity.

He smiled at her, his lips outstretched into non-existence, and when the traffic lights turned green, and the driver behind them pressed on his horn impatiently, he turned around and continued driving.

They drove for what felt like an eternity. Eternity's head lolled one way then the other, as the silence numbed her brain and relaxed her body into semi-sleepiness. When her forehead brushed against the back of the passenger seat she awakened, sat up and looked outside. The sun had partially risen, its pink rays reflecting off the windows of the houses, making it impossible to see inside them. They were on a quiet street, with nobody in sight, apart from a chubby black cat that was sitting on the hedges in front of a red-bricked house.

'Seriously though,' said Eternity, breaking the lengthy silence. 'How do you know where I want to be?'

'Haven't you noticed deary that no matter where you are I am too?'

True, she thought. He was absolutely right. Whenever she was in trouble, or felt like there was no hope, he would emerge out of the blue.

Eternity spotted a green pillow under the passenger's seat, picked it up with the tips of her fingers, and ignoring the scatterings of brown dots on it, she pulled it onto her lap. They stopped at another set of traffic lights and Eternity watched as an eccentric-looking old man, wearing a hat covered entirely in badges of all colours. His mouth was moving rapidly, but there was no one around.

'I'd sleep a little if I was you,' said Mr. Ahdub. 'Still got a while to go. There should be a pillow back there somewhere.'

They drove in and out of crowded roads and quiet ones, roads with houses and roads with shops, narrow roads and wide ones, each a completely different world. Eternity saw a middle-aged woman wearing a baggy dark purple coat walking a small dog on a leash in a calm

neighbourhood. She closed her eyes and dozed off for what seemed like a long time, and when she awoke she laid eyes on the same woman again this time on a busy road with people walking all in the same direction in large clusters. She was the only one walking the opposite way, her dog replaced by a tabby cat. Shortly after this, they entered an obviously wealthy neighbourhood with majestic houses of all bright colours. Children, no more than ten, stood at the upstairs window of every house on the road, watching and waving at her as they drove along. When she blinked and looked up at the houses again there was no sign of the children, only the thin netted curtains swayed from side to side as if they'd just been pulled away.

Occasionally throughout the journey she rested her head back on the headrest, not daring to place her head on the dirty pillow and closed her eyes. She thought about the panic that Mr. Johnson would be going through when he went to wake them up and saw that she was missing. Maybe this scene was taking place at that precise moment, while she was far away, being driven by a ghost to an unknown place. She thought about Leora and how she would probably be ecstatic and relieved that Valentina was all hers again.

'Are we nearly there?' she asked, lifting her head off the headrest. They had pulled into a road with grand houses sitting in the centre of lush lawns.

'Yes,' said Mr. Ahdub. 'Almost there.' He pressed the button on the steering wheel to open the window and spat outside.

They drove along a bit more, then, at the end of the road, Eternity saw the metal plaque, with half a heart and an X on one side, hanging high up on a building, that she was significantly familiar with. Mr. Ahdub abruptly pressed on the breaks, and Eternity hit her forehead onto the headrest of the passenger seat with great force. But, she didn't feel even the slightest tinge of pain.

'Here we are,' said Mr Ahdub, smiling at her through the mirror, the wrinkles around his eyes extending towards his hairline.

Eternity dry-heaved and felt the phlegm in her throat vibrating before she forced it back down. 'Here?' she asked, wrapping her fingers around her neck. 'I don't think I'm ready just yet.'

'Of course, here. Where else would I take you, me deary?' said Mr. Ahdub, turning off the engine. 'This is where you belong.'

Mr. Ahdub was right. Where else would she go anyway? It's not like she had a group of friends waiting for her return. There was Denise and Hannah, but if they'd truly cared would they have admitted her to that place? It was here or nowhere.

'OK,' she said, pressing her palms into the car seat. 'You're right. This is where I wanted to be, so this is where I'm going to be. It'll be hard at first, all the explaining about where I was and the apologies of how sorry I am because I was not performing well last time. But, I'll assure them that this time it'll be different. That I will perform my duties properly. I will speak to the dead. I will carry out the several rituals without questioning. Not even in my mind.' She looked out towards the house to see if she could identify anybody from the House wandering around outside. 'And, they'll probably be waiting for me to come back anyway. Wouldn't they? I mean where else would they find anybody who can speak to the dead.' Eternity opened the door and let herself fall out onto the pavement, gasping for air.

'Good girl. Now come on get up. You need to get up,' said Mr. Ahdub raising his voice. He opened his door and extended, first one foot then the other femininely onto the pavement. He then took out the withered stalk of the carrot from his pocket and threw it over the wall into the front lawn of the House.

Eternity lifted herself off the ground with difficulty, her legs trembling all over. She stood on the pavement next to Mr. Ahdub. She, looking at the House, he at her. On the outside the House hadn't changed at all since she'd last been here.

She noticed that the door was wide open, although it hadn't been a few minutes ago. There was some movement near it, as if someone had spotted her and had quickly run back in. Eternity and Mr. Ahdub ambled together towards the House without uttering a single word to each other.

I'm ready, I'm ready, I'm ready, Eternity kept repeating to herself in a half-whisper. She had no choice but to be ready, as she was only a few steps away from the front door. As they walked through the gate, the front door closed with a slam. Was this a sign that they didn't want her here? Had someone closed the door because they'd seen her? Thinking the worst of everything had become a standard feature of hers. She hadn't seen anybody push the door shut, so maybe the wind had caused the slam, she thought to herself. She wanted to believe it.

I'm ready, Eternity said to herself as she walked up the stairs to the front door. I'm ready. She stood in front of the door, held her breath, and gently hit her fist against her forehead. When she didn't knock, Mr. Ahdub knocked for her. They waited for what seemed like hours.

Nobody came to the door. She couldn't even hear any noise from inside. Were they out? Had she imagined that there was someone walking around the door? But, the door had been open no doubt, and had shut, unless her mind was creating things again.

Mr. Ahdub giggled and turned his back on the House.

'Is everything alright?' asked Eternity.

'Yes,' he said. 'Funny things come to my mind sometimes.'

Mr. Ahdub knocked on the door again, and then he started descending the stairs, taking tiny steps.

'Where are you going?'

'I just remembered I need to get something from the car. I'll be back,' he said, clutching on his belly with two hands.

'Can't you just get it later? I don't want to be here all by myself when the door opens. I feel like I'm not going to be able to talk.'

'You'll be fine. I promise,' he chuckled, turning sideways on the spot and winking at her.

Eternity watched him slide his feet along the ground towards his car, then he climbed in, started the engine and drove off. This was expected of Mr. Ahdub, saying one thing and doing another. He wasn't going to come back, she was sure of that.

She knocked on the door herself this time, and it wasn't long before she heard footsteps from inside, first faintly and then gradually louder and louder before the sound stopped just on the other side of the door.

The door opened slowly, and Eternity couldn't see anybody at first. She stared into the hallway, and then down at the spot where the red shoes had been resting on the first day of her admittance to the House. The shoes were not there. This meant that the residents of the House were all awake, probably busy with the duties that the order of the House had granted them. The door swayed in and out, on what seemed like its own accord, and because of this Eternity abstained from going inside.

Then, a stumpy girl, whose face was covered in freckles, so much so that Eternity could not distinguish the start of her skin and the end of her freckles, stepped out from behind the door. When the sunrays hit her face, Eternity noticed how yellow she was. Even her eyeballs were a faint shade of yellow.

‘Hello,’ said Eternity. ‘I’m Eternity. I used to live here.’ The girl took a step back. ‘I’ve never seen you before. Are you new?’

The girl nodded. She was holding something shiny within her fist, and Eternity couldn’t help but imagine it to be vegetable peeler, held ready at hand to dent her head if she did something offensive.

‘What’s your name?’ asked Eternity, not daring to take her eyes off the girl’s fist.

‘Fiona,’ she said.

Eternity heard a raucous laughter from upstairs.

‘There seems to be someone upstairs,’ said Eternity, taking a step closer towards the doorframe. ‘If you just get them for me. They’ll know who I am. And I’m sure you’ve heard of me. I’m The Agent Between Life and Death.’

‘No, you’re not.’

Eternity was taken aback. She didn’t know what to say. It was only natural for the girl to deny her agency between life and death, as she had never witnessed how important she was within the House. If the girl had not rejected her significance with such a harsh tone, Eternity would have let it go, but she felt as if she needed to defend herself.

‘I am,’ said Eternity calmly. ‘If you ask anybody in the House they’ll know. Is Betty inside?’

‘I’m not allowed to give you information about the inside,’ said the girl sternly.

‘You don’t have to because if you just get somebody from inside then you’ll understand who I am and what I do here.’

‘Denise is The Agent Between Life and Death,’ said the girl.

Eternity instantly felt sick, her stomach turned around on itself. How could someone else be doing what she had been gifted with? Wasn’t she the only gifted one? And how was it possible that there was more than one gifted person who could communicate with the dead and bring messages to the living?

Eternity noticed that somebody was standing at the top of the stairs, but the face was indistinguishable, the features concealed by a black fuzzy curtain, caused by the sun’s rays that were pervading through the window behind her.

‘Hi. Hello,’ shouted Eternity. ‘It’s me. Eternity.’

The figure held onto the banister.

‘It’s me Eternity. I haven’t been gone for that long. There must be someone who knows me.’

The figure entered the room that Eternity knew to be Betty’s.

‘Who was that?’ asked Eternity, glancing up frequently, in case the figure re-emerged.

‘I’m not allowed to tell you,’ said the girl, pushing the door towards Eternity.

‘No,’ said Eternity harshly, kicking the door, and using all her weight to prevent the girl from being able to close the door on her. ‘You just told me that you have a new Agent Between Life and Death.’

‘I wasn’t supposed to tell you that either,’ said the girl without emotion.

Someone stepped out of Betty’s room. It could have been the figure she had seen a couple of minutes ago, but if it wasn’t, then it was someone with a similar build. Broad shoulders, a thick neck, a waist too wide for the narrow hips.

‘Hi,’ said Eternity again. ‘I’m Eternity. I’m sure you’ve heard of me. I had a really important duty here. I’m The Agent Between Life and Death.’

‘We already have an Agent Between Life and Death,’ said the figure, ‘Her name is Denise.’ The voice was familiar to Eternity. The way it paused after every word, as if each word was a new sentence. She was certain she had heard it before but could not place a finger on it.

The figure started making its way down the stairs, and when it had taken two steps, the curtain vanished, and the features were revealed. Eternity stared speechless at the wavy blonde hair that rose and fell like waves with every step taken, and at the plump lips that were smeared with a thick layer of plum-coloured lipstick.

‘Hannah?’ gasped Eternity. ‘What are you doing here?’ A part of her was desperately trying to assure her that her mind was inventing things again, that this time it had managed to capture the full image of Hannah’s head and propped it onto somebody else’s body.

‘Yes babe. It’s me,’ said Hannah, taking catwalk-like steps towards her. ‘I’ve always been here.’

If only my mind would stop inventing things so perfectly, thought Eternity. First the head and now the voice.

‘What?’

‘I said I’ve always been here’ shouted Hannah, leaning into Eternity’s face. Her warm breath, infused with the faint hint of onion, caressed Eternity’s cheeks.

Eternity closed her eyes and counted from one to ten. When she opened them, she wouldn't be staring into Hannah's face, but instead someone else would be standing in front of her. Someone she had never seen before. But, when she did open them, it was Hannah's round black eyes that were looking back at her. Nothing made sense. But then nothing ever did make sense in her life.

'Eternity?' said Hannah's voice. It was Hannah she was certain.

Someone called out to Fiona from the back of the house, and she bowed towards Hannah.

'I'm being called, my Blessed Coordinator,' she said.

'Good. Go if you must,' said Hannah, not diverting her gaze from Eternity's.

Fiona skipped all the way into the kitchen, and they heard the back door bounce off its frame a couple of times, before there was silence once more.

Eternity felt like a whole kettle of boiling water had been poured down her head, scalding her whole body. It was Hannah and she looked very much in charge, with her stiff stance and the slight rise in the way she held her head, making it easier for her to look down on people.

'That was Lettaya's duty,' said Eternity, accusingly. 'What have you done with her?'

'Demoted,' said Hannah. 'This is my place, so I get to decide what happens to everyone.' She tilted her head further backwards and glared at Eternity through narrowed eyes.

There was a pounding in Eternity's head, as if the miniature person had returned, and was knocking on her brain to wake it up. Had Hannah really always been here when she was The Agent Between Life and Death? She closed her eyes and strained her memory to conjure images from the past. Her time at Denise's house. In bed. In and out of consciousness. Whole days which she had no recollection of whatsoever. She had thought that she was crazy, and despite clearly hearing every part of the conversation between Denise and Hannah about numbing her with a certain drug, she had convinced herself that she had imagined everything. That she was deranged and there was no way they could do this to her. Her only friends. She had believed that she was delusional.

'This is not where you used to live. I'm not crazy,' protested Eternity. 'You drugged me.'

Hannah's lips disappeared into her face as she smirked. Then, she started clapping. 'You've finally understood. And bingo. That's the right answer.'

‘And you were not here when I was here,’ she said, trying to collect her thoughts and digest Hannah’s confession simultaneously. ‘You weren’t. I’m certain.’

‘Well yes, I wasn’t. But I was,’ said Hannah. ‘I was there with Denise, but we were both here too, trying our utmost best to finish you up here.’ Hannah tapped on her left temple with the tip of her index finger.

‘But you were my friend, Hannah,’ said Eternity, grabbing at her hair at the front of her head, and pulling at them. ‘I thought you cared for me. I thought both of you cared for me.’

Hannah snorted and slapped the back of her right hand onto the palm of her left. ‘Come back down to earth Eternity,’ she said. ‘We never cared because you were never ill. Capisce?’

Eternity let go of her hair, and her head fell uncontrollably.

‘But you cared,’ insisted Eternity. Then remembering how they had sent her off without even saying a proper goodbye, she added: ‘You partially cared. Until you sent me away.’

‘We didn’t care. We never cared. We never will care. That was part of our plan as well. To get rid of you. We never thought you’d escape that place.’

‘But why?’ asked Eternity. Nothing made sense. Even her own emotions. There was no anger or hate on her part. Just an emptiness. As if everything inside of her had been taken away and she was a mere slab of flesh that could fall to the ground in a gooey mess.

‘Why? I’ll tell you why. Because it was always my Holy One this and my Lord that. Everyone worshipping you all the time. You proud of yourself. Proud of your powers. Being obnoxious. Ordering people around. Ordering me around. You were trying to take over Eternity. The House was slipping away from my hands, and I couldn’t stop it.’ Tiny drops of spit spewed out of her mouth.

‘Where’s Denise?’

‘She’s busy being The Agent Between Life and Death,’ said Hannah, folding her arms and gently hitting her foot against the wall.

‘So, she has powers too?’ asked Eternity.

‘Does it even matter?’

‘But I was The Agent Between Life and Death,’ said Eternity. ‘And Denise was just Denise.’

‘Well, now you’re just Eternity,’ said Hannah. ‘And if we’d managed to drown you that day you would have just been dead.’

‘That was you?’ asked Eternity, pulling out the insides of her pockets and then sliding them back in again.

‘Of course,’ said Hannah. ‘Who else would it be?’

‘So why didn’t I die?’

‘Well because I suspect that Lettaya came down and saved you before you froze.’ Hannah scratched at her neck, leaving three pink streaks, that quickly rose into long yellowish mounds.

Suddenly, Denise appeared at the kitchen door. She had a dab of blood in the centre of her forehead and was carrying a green carrier bag that was splattered inside and out with a liquidy redness. Eternity could see that the bag was full, but she avoided looking down at it. She wasn’t prepared to see the slaughtered remnants of a tortured rabbit. When Denise saw Eternity, she stopped and took a step back into the kitchen.

‘Hi Denise,’ said Eternity, lifting her hand to greet her.

Denise coughed, as if she was trying to dislocate a small piece of food that had become stuck in her throat. Then, the bag slipped from within her grip and pieces of fresh flesh and fur, still dotted with blood, scattered over her shoes and onto the floor. Eternity tried not to look, but even while trying to concentrate on Denise’s square teeth that were biting into her bottom lip, she couldn’t help but notice that one of the things laying on the floor was a severed bulbous rabbit’s tail.

‘What are you doing here?’ she asked Eternity, taking a step forwards, the bones crunching under her shoes. Without waiting for Eternity to reply she turned to Hannah. ‘What is she doing here? I thought she wasn’t ever going to come out of that place.’

Eternity thought about how the early days of her life were non-existent, and how her present life was a lie. What part of her life could she hold onto? She observed the faces of the two people that had deceived her into thinking they were her friends. They were both glaring at each other, both biting their lips. Neither sympathy nor empathy were evident on their faces. Eternity noticed that Denise wasn’t pregnant anymore. But, she had much bigger problems than interrogating her about whether her baby bump was real or not. That could come later, when she settled the problem of where she was going to stay that night, and the following nights, until she was able to do all the necessary things that adults of the outer world did to survive. Maybe if she asked nicely they would let her in. Why was she doing this to herself? Have some self-

dignity, she thought. If you won't respect yourself then how do you expect others to respect you? Yes, but I have nowhere to go, she thought. Would I rather sleep outside in the cold?

'Can I at least stay for the night? I've got nowhere to go. I'll leave as soon as I can,' said Eternity quietly, half hoping that they had not heard her.

Hannah swiftly turned her head towards Eternity, her hair slapping her across the face. 'What? We don't let third parties in,' said Hannah. 'You're classified as stranger material now. We've got some policies that we need to protect.'

'But I already know everything there is about this place. I lived here, as you know,' said Eternity.

'Well, no you don't know everything about this place, because we took precaution and made changes to the administration, the layout, the doctrines. Absolutely everything.'

Denise nodded in approval.

'Anyway,' said Hannah. 'That's it from us I guess. We all hope the best for you in life.' She placed her hand on Eternity's shoulder and escorted her towards the door with forceful thrusts to her upper body.

Eternity let herself be pushed along, and when was she on the outer side of the door, she remembered Denise's absent pregnant belly, and was just about to ask her whether she had in fact ever been pregnant at all, when Hannah gently shut the door.

CHAPTER 37

Eternity had ambled out of the gate and down the pavement, thinking about what she was going to do next. She had contemplated whether to knock on the door again but decided against it. They had turned her away and had made it clear that they were trying to murder her. Would she dare go back? Wouldn't they just complete the task that they had not been able to accomplish if they invited her in?

The house next to the House whose residents she had been chased away by a few weeks or months ago (she had lost all concept of time) seemed uninhabited. The black front gate was secured with a rusty lock, the curtains were drawn, and the washing line at the back had fallen to the ground. From where she was standing she could see an old mattress leaning up against the side of the building. She tugged at the lock of the gate, praying that the thick rust had weakened the strong metal, and that it would crumble into several copper pieces, but to her dismay the lock was strong. Breaking the territorial rules of gated houses with short walls, she climbed over and entered the confines of the house. She was delighted to find that the tall bushes on all three sides created a barrier between her world and that of the outside. This way she could listen to the sounds of the House with no danger of being seen.

She decided to observe the House for some time from the comfort of the mattress, to get an understanding of the changes that had been made, and why they detested her enough to kill her. Hannah had told her that Lettaya had been demoted, but she hadn't informed her of the reason and how she had reacted to her demotion. Maybe she could save Lettaya from the cunning rule of Hannah, and they could flee together to a better life.

As she sat on the edge of the mattress thinking, she noticed an off-pink t-shirt entangled into the wire of the washing line. It resembled the pink t-shirt that the swarthy girl had been wearing, but she couldn't be a hundred percent sure, like every other thing she couldn't be certain of. Had the girl been a ghost from the land of the deceased? Or had her delusional mind invented her too?

She felt exhausted and lay down on the mattress. She thought of whether Mr. Johnson and the residents of the care home were still looking for her or if they'd even attempted to at all. In fact, it occurred to her that they too may have been part of the plan. On the other hand, if they were not, then she couldn't stay here for long, as they'd be looking all over the city for her, and most probably would attempt to track her down through Hannah and Denise. That was

if they knew that both were part of the House. Eternity couldn't quite work out how much of their lives Mr. Johnson was aware of.

She wandered around at the back of the house where she noticed a cooker, crooked and corroding in the corner of the lawn. She tugged at the oven door. It creaked and scraped, but finally opened, almost sending Eternity flying. Inside were a variety of different tools, but what caught her eye was a tiny hammer with a large head and chipped handle. She slid it into her jumper's pocket. It was a perfect fit.

She would teach Hannah a lesson and the hammer would be an excellent tool that she could use to protect herself, during any sort of attack. How she would teach her this lesson she did not know yet. But she had only a few hours to come up with something. Whatever she was going to do had to be done by breakfast. She remembered that the women journeyed towards the river before breakfast to pour buckets of cooked rabbit into the water in honour of their children. The Blessed Coordinator would stay at home as far as she could remember. Hannah would be alone in the house. Eternity had an idea of what she was going to do, but she didn't admit it even to herself, lest it scared her and prevented her from executing it.

She had made herself comfy on the mattress and was staring up at the clouds transforming into a hundred different shapes, hoping that sleep would come to her soon, when she heard Hannah calling out.

'Ety. Ety. You can't have gone far. It's not even been five minutes.' It was strange hearing her name in the House being uttered by someone she'd thought was from the outer world.

Eternity lifted her head up off the mattress and listened. What did Hannah want? Why was she calling her after rudely making it clear that they did not want to make use of her services any longer?

'Ety. Please. We want to talk. You can come back. We weren't being serious. You know how I am, I love to speak in extremes.'

Extremes, thought Eternity. She was aware that Hannah was over the top about everything. What part of her speech was pushing toward the extreme? The part about their sinister plan to kill her?

'I'm here,' said Eternity, extending her head from the side of the hedges.

'Babe what are you doing there?' asked Hannah, her fingers wrapped around her throat, her breathing heavy and anguished. 'You scared the shit out of me.'

‘I have nowhere to go,’ said Eternity, throwing each of her legs, one at a time, over the wall. ‘I thought I’d stay here for tonight until I could figure out something else.’

‘You really thought we’d let you just stay here, did you?’ asked Hannah. ‘Denise. She’s here,’ she yelled over to Denise who Eternity could see was about to step into the House.

‘You did say you didn’t want me anymore,’ said Eternity, looking at Denise who had swung around, jumped down off the threshold and jogged towards them.

‘Well we’ve decided otherwise now. Haven’t we Denise?’ she said, not diverting her gaze from Eternity.

Denise murmured in approval.

‘We also think you should be baptised. You know how important that river is to all of us.’

‘Yes, where you were trying to kill me.’

‘We weren’t really,’ said Hannah. ‘It was just an error... on our part.’

‘What if I died?’ asked Eternity, regretting the question as soon as she had asked it. What other choice did she have but to trust Hannah at this point? She had nowhere to go. This was the only real place she knew. Familiarity was always appealing. She had to give them the benefit of the doubt. Plus, she had the hammer now, if any dire circumstances arose.

‘You wouldn’t have babe,’ said Hannah. ‘Anyway, we’re going to take you down there to baptise you. Make you one of our own again. You know, your contact with the outer people has resulted in a sort of disconnection, spiritually and all that. So, we’ve got to connect your spirit and what not. Right Denise?’

‘That’s right,’ said Denise, twisting her upper body from side to side.

‘OK,’ said Eternity confidently, although a hundred questions of doubt were swarming in her mind.

‘Good,’ said Hannah, slapping her hands together and smiling as if this was the most delightful news she’d ever heard. ‘Now you go inside. You know, get cleaned up. You need to be pure and clean for the baptism. Betty will sort you out. And then we’ll go down to the river together, just you and me before the dark starts to settle.’

‘Shall I go in myself?’ asked Eternity, when Hannah and Denise showed no sign of movement.

‘Yes. We’ll be coming too. In a bit.’

Eternity walked in between Denise and Hannah, climbed up from the side of the front balcony and pushed the slightly ajar door with the tip of her foot, stepping inside. Despite the change in authority and administration the inside of the House remained unchanged. The tall bronze vase that she had pushed to keep the door open a long time ago still stood beside the wardrobe behind the door. The smell of onion and cooked herbs still diffused into every room, settling on the furniture like dew. From where she was standing she could see that the sink was still overflowing with the entirety of the dishes in kitchen.

Eternity climbed up the stairs (two at a time as she always did) before turning towards her bedroom. Halfway down the corridor she saw Lettaya, her back to Eternity, fiddling with the doorknob.

‘Lettaya,’ Eternity called.

As soon as she heard Eternity’s voice, she bowed her head, opened her door, walked in and then shut it with a slam. Eternity ran towards the room and pounded on the door.

‘Lettaya?’

‘I’m not supposed to speak to you,’ came a scared voice from inside.

‘My Holy One,’ said someone from behind her. Eternity swung around to find Betty stepping out of her bedroom.

‘Betty. It’s so nice to see you.’ Eternity was genuine in her emotions. She was ecstatic to have encountered someone who she was not only familiar with but who referred to her as the Holy person that she was.

‘What are you doing here?’ she asked, pulling her cardigan from either side and folding her arms under her breasts.

‘I’ve come back,’ said Eternity. ‘Hannah let me come back. But Lettaya won’t open the door. She doesn’t seem to want to speak to me.’

Betty sighed. ‘Leave her be, my Holy One. They said you were gone forever.’

‘That’s what I thought too. But, I’m back now.’

‘Where’s the Blessed Coordinator?’ asked Betty, suspending her upper body over the banisters to look down.

‘In there...’ started Eternity, pointing to the room that Lettaya had shut herself in, then remembering that Hannah had taken over the role, she said: ‘She’s outside...with Denise.’

‘Oh...’

‘I need some clean clothes,’ said Eternity, pointing to the brown stains on her cardigan. ‘Me and Hannah are going down to the river for a baptism session, for me to be able to come back into the House.’

‘No,’ blurted Betty.

‘What?’

‘You can’t go down. The Blessed Coordinator said that if you were to ever come back, she’d get rid of you for good.’

‘She said that?’

‘Yes, but don’t tell her that I told you.’

‘I won’t,’ said Eternity. ‘But why?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Betty quickly. ‘I’ll get you something clean to wear.’ She stepped into her room, then without looking at Eternity she said: ‘You stay here I’ll get some for you.’

Get rid of me, thought Eternity. Would they get rid of me? They seemed genuinely regretful of refusing her admittance back into the House, but she was certain that Betty would never lie to her.

‘Here,’ said Betty, extending her a neatly folded jumper and trouser from which spread the smell off excessively used fabric conditioner. ‘You can get changed in the shower room.’

Eternity took the clothes from Betty’s hands, thanked her and was almost inside the shower room, when Betty whispered: ‘If I was you I wouldn’t go my Holy One.’

Eternity faced Betty, closed and opened her eyes in slow motion and smiled to let her know that she was grateful for her concern. She closed the door behind her, changed into her new clothes, and placed the hammer into the pocket of the jumper she had just put on.

‘Ety? Ety?’ Hannah called from downstairs.

‘Coming,’ screamed Eternity, folding her dirty clothes and dropping them onto the tiled pedestal she had bathed on what seemed like a long time ago.

Hannah must not have heard her, because she bellowed with much more volume. ‘Has anybody seen Ety?’

‘I’m here,’ said Eternity, walking across the upper landing, her hands plunged deep into her pocket, caressing the smooth and cold metal of the hammer. ‘I just got changed.’

‘Good. Shall we get going then?’

‘Yes,’ mumbled Eternity. She stared at Hannah, observing her body language, trying to understand whether this was really going to be her journey to death. Would she then be The

Agent between Death and Life? Hannah's stance was reeking arrogance as usual, her head was barely craned upwards when speaking to Eternity, as if she did not dare look up to Eternity. Eternity descended the stairs, one at a time, as if she was in no rush to go to the place she thought she was headed to.

CHAPTER 38

‘It won’t take that long,’ said Hannah, when they were about a quarter of a way down the hill. ‘Just a few minutes.’

Eternity stroked the hammer which was no longer cold but warmed by her body’s heat. Every so often she glanced at Hannah trying to figure out whether she was as scared as she herself was. ‘Don’t go my Holy One,’ Betty had said. Why was she going then? Probably because she wanted to believe that Hannah wouldn’t do such a thing, and this was a single instance where she could prove that she wouldn’t. But what if she did and everything, absolutely everything, breathing, smiling, listening, seeing, just ended there and then?

Hannah’s features were stable, her eyes looked intensely ahead, her mouth was relaxed under her small nose. Occasionally she would blink, but not frequent enough Eternity thought. The wind around them picked up speed every now and then, hitting them firmly across the face and then calming down to caress their beaten faces, as if it desired to punish them for their sinister thoughts but pitied them for the burden these thoughts inflicted on their souls.

When they had descended more than half way down the hill, Eternity asked: ‘How’s it done? The baptism.’

‘You really wanna know?’

‘I wouldn’t be asking if I didn’t.’

‘It’s easy. I just hold your head in the water a bit and then you’re basically baptised.’

It’s true, thought Eternity. It’s all going to end here. My head is going to be held into the river, water is going to flow into my lungs, I’m going to stop breathing and that’s going to be it. Betty was right. She yanked her arm out of Hannah’s grip, plunged her hand into her pocket and tried to make its rubber handle comfortable within her palm.

‘There’s nothing to worry about,’ added Hannah. ‘It will be over in a blink of an eye. One minute you’re not baptised and then the next minute...’

One minute I’ll be here, thought Eternity, and the next minute I won’t. She pulled the hammer out of her pocket and held it up in front of a stumbling Hannah who was trying to steady herself by touching the ground.

‘What the fuck?’ shouted Hannah, as she unsuccessfully attempted to stand up straight. ‘What are you doing? Ety?’

‘I will,’ said Eternity, staring straight into Hannah’s scared eyes.

‘You won’t do it.’ Hannah was breathing heavily through her mouth, still bent over, her fingertips gently touching the earth.

Terrified that she wouldn’t do it if she started overthinking, Eternity swung the hammer and plunged the claw side into Hannah’s neck.

‘You bitch,’ rasped Hannah. She dropped to the ground on her side like a freshly cut log and rolled a single turn.

An image flashed before Eternity’s eyes, her head plunged into a large mass of water, trying desperately to hold her breath, her screams muffled and her eyes stinging with intense salt. ‘More stones,’ she heard Hannah’s panicked voice say quietly as if she were far away. ‘We need more. Stuff them into her pockets.’

Eternity lifted the hammer and hit Hannah once again. She was coughing, attempting to lift her arm but failing to do so.

Eternity saw herself dressed extravagantly in the red puffy dress she’d found in her wardrobe, standing at the front door of the house, welcoming a younger brown-haired Hannah in. ‘We’re hear to help,’ she said. ‘You will be happy here. We’ll help you cope. Suppress your pain a little bit.’

Eternity struck again, and noticed that all movement in Hannah had ceased.

Eternity saw the girl in the pink pyjamas before her eyes in a hazy, almost transparent way, and heard her speaking. ‘I died,’ she started, ‘but it’s not so bad here.’ ‘You sure?’, Eternity heard herself asking her. ‘Are you a hundred percent sure?’

Blood seeped out of Hannah’s wound and trickled down the side of her neck, forming a scarlet-coloured puddle near her shoulder.

No overthinking. No overthinking, Eternity whispered to herself.

She gazed down the hill and realized that they were not too far from the river. The curve of the river glistened amongst the scruffy grass. Suddenly, her world submerged into crimson, as if a red curtain had suddenly been pulled over her eyes. What to do? she murmured to herself, letting the hammer fall to the ground, forming a perfect hammer-shape in the soil. Since there was at most thirty steps left to the river, she decided that she’d drag the body down. As she was about to grab Hannah’s feet, she spotted a figure dressed in bright blue from top to bottom, step out from behind a gnarly tree with a thick bark. Eternity froze, her arms squeezing

Hannah's bony ankles, the inside of her mouth was dry, and her heart beat erratically inside her chest. I've been caught, thought Eternity. I've definitely been caught.

'It's only me,' said a voice, chuckling. It was Mr. Ahdub.

'Oh god,' sighed Eternity, breathing once more and pressing her palm firmly onto her heart. The cold air tickled her throat, triggering a cough, which she held in. 'I thought you were never going to come. You said you were going to get something from the car and then you drove off,' she said, dropping Hannah's other leg too.

Mr. Ahdub walked up to her. 'I'm here now though, aren't I dear?' he said.

Eternity cracked her neck. 'Well I don't think I need you. I did what I was supposed to do and now I have to make sure that I complete the task without getting caught,' she said, lowering her voice. 'I need to hurry up. The girls will be here soon.' She picked up Hannah's legs again which were as lifeless like a dolls. 'Are you going to help me?' she asked.

'I know you killed her. And no deary,' he said, panting like a fatigued pug. 'I don't get involved in such things.'

'OK. I'll do it myself,' said Eternity, pulling Hannah as she took small backward steps towards the river. Eternity couldn't believe how someone with Hannah's build could carry such weight. Did people get heavier after death?

'I'll just give you some guidance,' shouted Mr. Ahdub from above her, as she had proceeded past him. His rasping had evolved into an ear-splitting wheeze.

Eternity gazed up and saw that blood was trickling down from the spot where Eternity had made the hits several times.

'You can't surely drag her all the way down to the river like that,' said Mr. Ahdub. 'What happened to respect for the dead? The dead are always desperate for respect, but they never get any.'

'What difference does it make?' said Eternity, continuing on her journey. She was glad that she'd chosen to drag her face down rather than the opposite. 'She's dead anyway.'

Hannah's head hopped up and down as it hit rocks and pebbles causing sounds like knuckles on a door.

Mr. Ahdub followed and watched as Eternity reached the river, his hands hugging his round belly, his golden jewellery jingling.

'Great job deary,' he said, when they had reached the river bank.

‘If you could at least help me throw her into the river,’ said Eternity, looking back at Mr. Ahdub to make sure he hadn’t abandoned her as he had done on several other occasions.

‘OK, but only because it’s you, my lovely one. My honey buns,’ said Mr. Ahdub, bending down to lift Hannah’s head.

‘Shall we do it then?’ said Mr. Ahdub, ejecting hot air and spittle out of his mouth.

‘Yes. Hold on tightly,’ said Eternity, wrapping her fingers around Hannah’s ankles. She pushed the sole of Hannah’s flat shoes that were almost falling off her feet.

Mr. Ahdub wrapped his chubby hands around Hannah’s throat. Hannah’s blonde locks covered her face, but through the strands of hair Eternity could see the purple crusty layer that had formed over the wound.

‘Make sure her hair stays that way,’ said Eternity.

They lifted her up. Eternity staggered backwards with the shock of how light Hannah was compared to her hefty weight only a few minutes ago. She had prepared herself for a much heavier Hannah. Was it because the blood had drained out?

‘On a count of three we throw her,’ said Eternity.

Mr. Ahdub nodded and his face broke into a joyful smile, as if throwing dead bodies into a mass of water was his favourite activity.

‘One... Two...’

They swayed her body one way and then the other.

Without saying three they threw her in. Hannah didn’t sink immediately but lolled on the surface. Then, slowly, head first, she sunk down. A faint gurgle followed as her body was completely swallowed up by the waters.

Mr. Ahdub and Eternity didn’t say a single word after that. She felt lonelier than usual. As if there was an impenetrable invisible wall between her and the rest of the world. Had she been hoping that Hannah was going to revive before they had the chance to throw her in? Probably. She tried to think back to all the memories they had had together, just to prove to herself that what had just happened was real. The first time she had met her in front of the House, their short meeting in the coffeeshop, the baby shower, her occasional sightings of Hannah when she had been veering in and out of consciousness, the way she had shut the door on her when she’d

been ready for confrontation, her last words (“you bitch”) after she’d struck her with the hammer, and her vision of greeting her into the House and Hannah was real.

‘Mr. Ahdub? I never had a chance to ask Denise. Were you even really her father?’

No response.

She turned around to see what he was doing. There was no sign of him. He had abandoned her again. She wondered whether he would appear again. Probably not. But there wasn’t going to be anymore distress, was there? No more Hannah, so no more lies. So, maybe that was it.

A blunt plop came from the river and for an instant she felt relieved. It was probably Hannah. Had she woken up? She turned around, almost certain that she was going to be face to face with her, the large wound around her neck still present but somewhat healed. But it was just her red shoe floating on the top of the water.

She walked over and reached for the shoe. Inside it was the cratered pebble that she had found on the day that everything had started. She threw the shoe back into the river, placed the pebble into her pocket and walked up the hill, all the way to the House, the same way she had come down.

She knocked on the door of the House without hesitation, and it was immediately opened by Denise who, Eternity noticed, was desperately glancing over her shoulder towards the river. For Hannah, Eternity was sure. Slowly crossing her arms over her chest, Denise bowed down.

‘Welcome home, my Holy One.’

HOW DOES TRAUMA MANIFEST NON-FICTIONAL AND FICTIONAL CULTS?:
EXPLORING *THE GIRLS*, *FOXLOWE*, *AFTER ME COMES THE FLOOD*, AND *THE*
GRIEVING MOTHERS OF THE DEPARTED CHILDREN

INTRODUCTION

Cults (also referred to as alternative religions)¹ may not be principally associated with trauma, but this thesis seeks to explore how trauma leads to the proliferation of the cult in both fact and fiction. Individuals who have endured nightmarish events, like the death of a loved one during an expansive war, an impending death due to a stubborn illness, involuntary displacement due to dissected lands, or even the idea of being forced to live in such an unstable and disorderly world, have found consolation in these small belief systems that promise order and understanding. Cults pledge a ‘special insight, some type of special knowledge unknown to the rest of the world,’² and claim that it is this exemplary vision of theirs that will make the world a better place. The emergence of cults from a culture of trauma has been explored in academic texts as well as novels. Academia studies non-fictional accounts of lives before and after admittance into these contained ideological and religious institutions, while fiction does the same with invented characters and cults. Studying these texts will show the reader that where there was once confusion and suffering caused by trauma, there is now, after joining a cult, at the very least, an understanding of trauma, a collective embracing, as one meets and shares stories with individuals who have experienced similar terrorising events and who are equally in search of order and meaning in their lives. In some cases, fiction and non-fiction merge, and individuals who have been affected by cults, either directly or through the act of witnessing, use the art of story-telling to document their observations on cults and portray how personal trauma might be seen as their greatest instigator.

This dissertation sets out to explore why and how cults emerge from trauma. It will focus on fictional cults and non-fictional cults equally, hence novels set in made-up cults and ones that base their stories on real cults, as well as academic studies on real-life cults as

¹ Hunt, Stephen J., *Alternative Religions: A Sociological Introduction* (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2003), p. 1.

² Snow, Robert L., *Deadly Cults: The Crimes of True Believers* (Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2003), p. 124.

secondary sources to justify my arguments on trauma in regard to the way it manifests these alternative belief systems. The fictional cults/alternative religions that are going to be discussed in this thesis are; *Foxlowe* by Eleanor Wasserberg,³ *The Girls* by Emma Cline,⁴ and *After Me Comes The Flood* by Sarah Perry.⁵ After reading several books set in cults or having cultic elements in their plots in terms of the way in which the systems within the novels operate (some of which were; *Whit* by Iain Banks, *The Acts of the Assassins* by Richard Beard, *The Crying of Lot 49* by Thomas Pynchon, *Stranger in a Strange Land* by Robert A. Heinlein, *Demian* by Herman Hesse, and *The Possibility of an Island* by Michel Houellebecq), I chose to write about *Foxlowe*, *The Girls*, and *After Me Comes The Flood*, because I felt that the characters' traumas was the focal point of all three novels, by which I mean that the trauma of the characters is at the centre of the plots, every happening in the story depending on it. Trauma is also at the heart of my own novel, *The Grieving Mothers of the Departed Children*,⁶ as the establishment of the cult in my creative piece depends on the trauma of its followers who have all experienced the death of their child and thus come together to provide each other emotional support. Therefore, since all the novels I am going to discuss in this dissertation concern cults dependent on the trauma of their characters I believe that I will be able to form a literary analysis of how the writers of each deal with the psychologically frail states of said characters and the way in which trauma helps to strengthen the structure of the cults in each of the novels, thus sustaining the narrative in each.

The other novels that I read, despite having elements of trauma in their characters and plots, did not incorporate it into their narratives in as much detail as *Foxlowe*, *The Girls* and *After Me Comes The Flood* do. Instead they concentrated more on the way belief systems operated, such as; the everyday occurrences in the cult, the cult leader's future plans, and the hierarchies within the cult. Another reason I have chosen to study these three novels as case studies is because they are the most contemporary pieces of fiction set in cults published at the time of my research.⁷ All the cults will be studied to demonstrate how trauma gives birth to them, alongside analysis of my own work, *The Grieving Mothers of the Departed Children*, which explores attendant themes in the medium of a full-length novel.

³ Wasserberg, Eleanor, *Foxlowe* (London: Fourth Estate, 2016).

⁴ Cline, Emma, *The Girls* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2016).

⁵ Perry, Sarah, *After Me Comes The Flood* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2015)

⁶ Dengtash, Ayshe, *The Grieving Mothers of the Departed Children* (2018)

⁷ My research took place between the years 2015 to 2018.

Although there have been academic texts studying the birth of cults such as Stephen Hunt's *Alternative Religions: A Sociological Introduction*, Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge's *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival, and Cult Formation*⁸ and Ronald B. Flowers' *Religion in Strange Times: The 1960s and 1970s*,⁹ each identifying the horrifying events¹⁰ that influenced the creation of cults, none of them have directly analysed cults in the light of trauma theory. I will be arguing that trauma is the greatest instigator of cults, using E. Ann Kaplan's and Cathy Caruth's theories on trauma to understand the effect that the experiences of trauma sufferers have on the creation of cults.

The dissertation is formed of four chapters, the first being split into two sections. In chapter 1 section 1, I will be defining trauma, as it is important to understand what trauma is so that a clear link can be formed between an individual's trauma and their self-admittance into a cult as a coping mechanism. I will be using Caruth and Kaplan's theories of trauma. Caruth is vital for this dissertation because the term trauma theory first appears in her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. On the other hand, Kaplan takes a unique approach to trauma, demonstrating the ways in which individuals find themselves in cults because of societal pressure. She focuses on how outside forces, such as society, media and the government, alienate the trauma sufferer, forcing them to search for their own "road to salvation", eventually leading them into these alternative religions.

In chapter 1 section 2, I will be defining the word 'cult'. I will define the word in accordance with its relation to trauma and religion. Cults and religions are inseparable and share similar qualities in terms of structure and operation, hence the former cannot be defined without the mentioning of the latter.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 consists of the case studies of the three novels; *The Girls*, *Foxlowe*, and *After Me Comes The Flood* respectively. It examines these novels in relation to trauma theory, following certain trauma suffering characters within each one, and proving how trauma gives birth to cults, regardless of whether they are fictional or not. It will examine how cults aid their members in embracing their suffering and transform their lives by creating hope of a better, more orderly world. It may sound like quite a leap from personal, private pain to global

⁸ Sims Bainbridge, William, Rodney Stark, *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival, and Cult Formation* (California: University of California Press, 1985).

⁹ Flowers, Ronald B., *Religion in Strange Times: The 1960s and 1970s* (Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1984).

¹⁰ Such as World War II and the Vietnam War. [Smart, Ninian, *The World's Religions: Second Edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 478.]

geopolitical revolution, but it is arguably the vulnerability of its followers to grand narratives and totalising answers which the model of the cult exploits. These chapters will also discuss the stylistic elements of the novels, precisely the literary techniques used by the authors to portray the trauma of their characters, thus strengthening my argument on how cults use the trauma of their members to create a dependent environment that in turn nurtures the organisation and aids in their flourishing.

Lastly, each case study section includes an analysis of my own novel, *The Grieving Mothers*, in relation to the way in which the case study novels relate to my own work. I will discuss my novel's similarities and differences in terms of plot and literary technique and style in comparison to the three case study novels, examining how we (the writers) all approach trauma when thinking about characterisation, setting, and style. Nevertheless, I will argue that a cult cannot establish a firm foundation or even come together without the trauma of its members.

CHAPTER 1: DEFINING TRAUMA, RELIGION, AND RELIGIOUS CULTS

DEFINING TRAUMA THEORY

As stated in the introduction since this dissertation focuses on the way cults operate (by focusing their recruitment procedures on trauma sufferers), the reasons behind their prosperity (by promising trauma sufferers a new trauma-free identity, and pledging a resolution to personal problems, and offering teachings on how to deal with the ‘stresses of life’¹¹ and how to ‘adapt to the expectations of society’¹²), and the changes to society that they set out to accomplish (setting goals ‘of bringing in a new world order’¹³), this section aims to define trauma theory.

Freud was one of the first psychologists to touch upon trauma (not known as trauma at the time) in human beings during the twentieth century by using the word *Nachtraglichkeit* (which translates from German to English as ‘deferring action’); an early term he coined to describe the initial understandings of the symptoms that were later to be interpreted as trauma. He described trauma as ‘a pattern of suffering that is inexplicably persistent in the lives of certain individuals.’¹⁴ Listening to the stories of his patients who had participated in the First World War, Freud states his bewilderment at their ‘repetitive re-enactments’¹⁵ of the events that they experienced during the Great War. Caruth summarises Freud’s description of trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* as a

peculiar and sometimes uncanny way in which catastrophic events seem[ed] to repeat themselves for those who have passed through them. In some cases, Freud points out that these repetitions are particularly striking because they seem not to be initiated by the individual’s own acts but rather appear as the possession of some people by a sort of fate, a series of painful events to which they are subjected, and which seem to be entirely outside their wish or control.’¹⁶

¹¹ Flowers., p. 95.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Caruth, Cathy, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History* (Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 2016), p.1

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Building on Freud, Caruth defines trauma as;

a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or set of events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event. [...] [T]rauma consists solely in the structure of its experience or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it.¹⁷

Caruth uses the image of a soldier observing sudden death on a large scale in a state of numbness, only to re-experience it later as repeated nightmares; ‘the recurring image of trauma in our century’¹⁸ she calls it, to justify Freud’s idea of the repetitive nature of trauma. Hence, due to the re-occurrence of the traumatic experiences in the thoughts of the individual, the trauma is never-ending, and the individual is retraumatized time and time again.

More recently, E. Ann Kaplan stresses the importance and necessity to share and “translate” trauma; that is, of finding ways to make meaning out of, and to communicate, catastrophes that happens to others as well as to oneself.¹⁹ The opposite of translating the traumatic experience is repressing it, an act that is highly common in trauma sufferers. As Henry Idema explains, repression consists of depriving the trauma of its

affective cathexis, so that what remains in consciousness is nothing but its ideational content, which is perfectly colourless and is judged to be unimportant.” Or, putting it another way [...] “the essence of repression lies simply in turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from the conscious [mind].²⁰

¹⁷ Ganteau, Jean-Michel, Susana Onega, *Trauma and Romance in Contemporary British Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 203.

¹⁸ Caruth, p. 12.

¹⁹ Kaplan, E. Ann, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2005), p. 19.

²⁰ Idema, Henry, *Religion and the Roaring Twenties: A Psychoanalytic Theory of Secularization in Three Novelists: Anderson, Hemingway, and Fitzgerald* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1990), p. 84.

As Freud claims, a continuation in repressing traumatic memories may lead to other detrimental health issues such as neurosis;²¹ a state of high anxiety.²² Hence, the lesson one learns from Kaplan's, Idema's, and Freud's statements is that working to eliminate repression of trauma is vital.

Kaplan claims that alongside the trauma suffering individuals themselves, cultures are also eager to suppress traumatic events. This may be because of two reasons:

for political or social reasons [...] [as] it is too dangerous for the culture [...] to acknowledge or recall, just as the forgotten contents in individual consciousness are too dangerous to remember. Individuals and cultures, then, perform forgetting as a way of protecting themselves from the horrors of what one (or the cultures) has done or what has been done to oneself or others in one's society.²³

Being forced to forget the traumatic experience entails a withdrawal into oneself, thus the trauma sufferer is unable to translate or share the particular experience with others. Quoting Daniela F. Sieff, the trauma sufferer therefore feels as if there is no other

choice but to dissociate parts of [themselves], and abandon aspects of [their] internal reality. In time, [they] have become self-alienated. Out of such self-alienation flows shame: an all-pervasive, embodied sense of being fundamentally defective as human being. [...] In a misguided attempt to alleviate the suffering born of dissociation, self-alienation and shame, we look *outside* of ourselves for healing.²⁴

It is out of this self-alienation that cults emerge to the traumatised as a possible solution to aid them in translating their suffering or coping with it. As Steven J. Breckler states;

²¹ Ibid.

²² Spielberg, Charles D., *Anxiety and Behaviour* (London: Academic Press, 1966), p. 182.

²³ Kaplan, p. 74.

²⁴ Sieff, Daniela F., *Understanding and Healing Emotional Trauma: Conversations with pioneering clinicians and researchers* (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 25.

Cults will focus on people who have experienced a recent trauma or loss, such as the death of a loved one, the breakup of a relationship, or a significant failure at school or work. People who have suffered recent loss are emotionally vulnerable and may be easier to manipulate than people who feel satisfied with their current lifestyle.²⁵

As cults recruit individuals who are ‘emotionally vulnerable’, the cult environment becomes an interesting and ideal place for the new potential recruit. Dena Rosenbloom, Mary Beth Williams, and Barbara E. Watkins claim that;

[a]fter not knowing whom to talk to or how to put [their] experiences into words, it can be tremendously healing to learn there are others who understand and share what [they] have been through. Talking to others who have had similar experiences also helps [them] get back in touch with [themselves], and accept [themselves].²⁶

Simply just “translating” or conveying their trauma verbally to a group of like-minded individuals (who themselves had endured traumatic events) in an attempt to find meaning amongst their traumatic experiences is a source of motivation for the new recruit of a cult.

DEFINING CULTS

This section will set out to determine a definition of ‘cult’ that will be used when referring to cults throughout this dissertation. It will argue that cults emerge within societies out of a need to make sense of the unfolding catastrophic events which lead to trauma. The section will also aim to prove that the formation of cults stems from mainstream religion’s inadequacy in providing rational reasons for the trauma-inducing events experienced in a society. Furthermore, I will strive to distinguish between religions and cults, as the latter cannot be

²⁵ Breckler, Steven, James Olson, Elizabeth Wiggins, *Social Psychology Alive* (California: Wadsworth, 2006), p. 293.

²⁶ Rosenbloom, Dena, Mary Beth Williams, Barbara E. Watkins, *Life After Trauma: A Workbook for Healing* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2010), p. 258.

defined without the mentioning of the former. The strong link between religions and cults will be explored with accounts of how the mainstream religions of today started off as cults, suggesting that the belief systems of cults could be as vital in bringing order and emotional fulfilment to society as that of mainstream religions. Characteristics of both cults and religions will also be stated to identify the differences between the two.

Major religions emerge from cults as each religion starts off as a cult, with only a few followers when compared to the larger number of followers of mainstream religions in the societies that they establish themselves in. Due to the small number of their followers, as stated by Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, cults are always viewed as the 'deviant religious tradition in society. In time, they may become the dominant tradition, in which case there is no longer much tension between them and the environment, and they become the church or churches of that society.'²⁷ Quoting Jeff Walker, for a cult to become a religion, they need to 'build up traditions, a body of myths, parables, scriptures, and dogmas that are interpreted and protected by specialists (priests, etc) who see themselves as the guardians of truth, not the bringers of it.'²⁸

As an example of the above Philip F. Esler explains how Christianity originated from Judaism:

Christianity was initially a Jewish sect [or cult]²⁹ in the Middle East during the mid-1st century. Jesus was a prophetic figure who looked for the restoration of Israel under the rule of God. All of his followers were Jews, and all of those who first proclaimed his resurrection and vindication as God's messiah were Jews. Their belief that Jesus, crucified and risen, was God's promised messiah distinguished them from their fellow Jews, but in all respects they remained loyal Jews, worshipping at the temple according to the established Jewish pattern.³⁰

²⁷ Sims Bainbridge, Stark, *The Future of Religion*, p. 26.

²⁸ Walker, Jeff, *The Ayn Rand Cult* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), p. 73.

²⁹ As stated by Jamie Sexton and Ernest Mathijis, the only difference between a cult and a sect is that cults 'originate much more organically, whereas sects are typically break-offs from churches.' However, this does not mean that a cult cannot also break off from a church, as seen in the Branch Davidians which are a cult that base their beliefs on Christianity. [Mathijis, Ernest, Jamie Sexton, *Cult Cinema: An Introduction* (Massachusetts: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), p. 1].

³⁰ Esler, Philip F., *The Early Christian World: Volume I-II* (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 136.

Shortly after, the news of Jesus' messianic status had started spreading amongst areas with non-Jewish populations, and thereafter a diversity and disagreement commenced 'about the extent to which Gentile (and Jewish) believers in Christ should adhere to the Jewish way of life with all that entailed.'³¹ Ferdinand Christian Baur, the German Protestant theologian of the 19th century, states that the development of early Christianity arose out of the clash between Petrine Jewish Christianity and Pauline Gentile Christianity, 'two opposing wings which came together in the "synthesis" of orthodox Roman Christianity,'³² giving birth to early Christianity.

There was a proliferation of cults in the 20th century, and as John Hall, Philip D. Schuyler, and Sylvaine Trinh express this was due to the 'apocalyptic images [that brought] focus on anxieties and suspicions [in a world that was] undergoing dramatic change.'³³ During this period, humanity witnessed the unfolding of the two World Wars, the Holocaust and the Atomic bombs, all three events causing death on a large scale never witnessed before. Halls states that during the course of the twentieth century 'the sharp modern lines between fact and fiction, reality and the imaginary [had] blurred.'³⁴ Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer says that individuals having experienced a 'loss of faith'³⁵ were 'in search for the means to cope with the unfathomable destruction caused by these horrific events.' Louis Richard Binder describes

Religion [...] [as] socially powerful' and affirms that it is during times when mankind tries to 'adjust himself to an ever-changing environment which imposes certain and definite restraints upon him [that] man discovers that religion is a conditioning factor which is effective for his own complete happiness as well as for the good of the society of which he is an integral part.'³⁶

Anne Eyre expresses that while 'traditional, locally based religious communities' were deteriorating, people were searching for alternative belief systems, to put an end to their

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Hall, John R., Philip D. Schuyler, Sylvaine Trinh, *Apocalypse Observed: Religious Movements and Violence in North America, Europe, And Japan* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 5.

³⁴ Ibid., p.5.

³⁵ Cornis-Pope Marcel, John Neubauer, *History of the Literary Cultures of East-central Europe: Junctures and disjunctures in the 19th and 20th centuries* (Amsterdam: John Benjamin Publishing, 2004), p. 228.

³⁶ Binder, Louis Richard, *Modern Religious Cults and Society* (New York: AMS Press, 1970), p. 9.

‘question[ing] [of] the value of [their unstable] society.’³⁷ Hunt views cults as an “‘alternative” filling some kind of spiritual “gap” and fulfil[ing] a latent demand in contemporary Western society, [...] this may have been [religious cults] historical role.’³⁸

Hall, Schuyler, and Trinh claim that religious cults were sought with the idea that they would ‘meet the pressing demands of [such a] hectic age,’³⁹ helping individuals cope with their struggles to adapt to the ever-changing world by ‘develop[ing] along quiescent lines, retreating to a heaven-on-earth where life unfolds “beyond this world.”’⁴⁰ An example for this is the Heaven’s Gate cult, which believed that the God mentioned in the Bible is in essence a mentally and physically advanced extra-terrestrial.⁴¹ According to their core belief system all mainstream religions were corrupted and wrongfully taught to people by the Luciferians. This made the world an unsuitable place to live in and, as Benjamin Zeller writes, a place that was formed ‘to separate the renegades of Heaven—the Luciferians—from those who have risen above the human level, and a place to test souls striving to the Level above Human.’⁴² Marshall Applewhite, their founder, confidently taught the group that there was another entirely different planet in the universe, called The Evolutionary Level Above Human (TELAH) where people lived in contentment, taking all their source from the sunlight, without the need to eat and drink.⁴³ Striving to get to TELAH they started preparing, most notably taking great care of their bodies as they perceived their bodies as a ‘cocoon’⁴⁴ that would contain them during your transition. Applewhite persuaded his followers that on March 26, 1997, a spacecraft trailing the Hale-Bopp comet was to arrive on Earth to pick them up⁴⁵ and take them to this harmonious planet they referred to as the ‘Kingdom of Heaven.’ On the official Heaven’s Gate website, the

³⁷ Dr. Anne Eyre, ‘Religious cults in twentieth century America’, *American Studies Resource Center*, (1996) <<http://www.americansc.org.uk/Online/cults.htm>> [Date accessed: 30/06/2017] (paragraph 4 of 12)

³⁸ Hunt, Stephen J., *Alternative Religions: A Sociological Introduction* (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2003), p.9.

³⁹ Hall, Schuyler, and Trinh, p. 9.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Zeller, Benjamin E., *Heaven’s Gate: America’s UFO Religion* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), p. 95.

⁴² Ibid., p.105.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 102.

⁴⁴ Ashcraft, W. Michael, Eugene V. Gallagher, *History and Controversies: Introduction to New and Alternative Religions in America* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2006), p. 208.

⁴⁵ Gorden, Kurt Van, Martin Walter, Jill Martin Kische, *Kingdom of the Occult*, (Tennessee: Thomas Nelson 2008), p. 359.

remaining followers describe the last few days of the suicides, as they retreated to their own small worlds, preparing for a better life that they thought they would find on another planet.⁴⁶

Hence, judging on the quotes mentioned in this section, particularly Hall's and Schuyler's, the emergence of cults was not only entirely dependent on the human need to overcome the traumas induced by wars, but that it was also reliant on the human desire to abandon their existing sorrows and pains brought by traumatic experiences because of a variety of events (that does not necessarily have to be wars), to cope with their struggles, to adapt to the ever-changing world, and to attain happiness. This is the context that cults are used throughout this dissertation.

⁴⁶ George Chryssides claims that [i]n the last days, [they] focused on two primary tasks; one—of making a last attempt at telling the truth about how the Next Level may be entered (our last effort at offering to individuals of this civilization the way to avoid “suicide”); and two—taking advantage of the rare opportunity to have each day—to work individually on our personal overcoming and change; in preparation for entering the Kingdom of Heaven.’ [Chryssides, George B., *Exploring New Religions* (New York: Continuum Books, 2001), p.2] For the act of suicide they were going to be committing, was not suicide at all, but was their way of ‘turn[ing] against the Next Level when it is being offered.’ Our Position Against Suicide, *Official Heaven’s Gate Website*, <<http://www.heavensgate.com/misc/letter.htm>> [Date accessed: 29/06/2017] (paragraph 5 of 5).

CHAPTER 2 TRAUMA IN A FICTIONAL ACCOUNT OF A NON-FICTIONAL CULT: *THE GIRLS*

The Girls, Emma Cline's debut novel, has its roots in trauma's debilitating effect on the human judgement and the subsequent self-admittance into religious cults for the sake of belonging, not only in its story and characters, which I will discuss in detail throughout this section, but also in the history that caused the novel to materialise; that is to say, Cline's own views on trauma and her relationship to it in connection to a non-fictional religious cult. Although my own novel is not based on a real cult, much like *The Girls* it explores the way in which trauma weakens the critical and rational thinking skills in human beings causing them to devote themselves to the "binding" atmosphere within cults. I will be discussing *The Grieving Mothers* in conjunction with *The Girls* all throughout this section where appropriate, exploring how trauma maintains the structure of the cults in both novels, and how myself and Cline use trauma to form a narrative, and which literary techniques (similar and differing) we use to do so.

Emma Cline, born and raised in California which is home to a large abundance of religious cults, such as the Heaven's Gate cult (famous for its mass suicides)⁴⁷ and The Children of God (well known for its Flirty Fishing policy which promoted outlandish sexuality in order to attract followers),⁴⁸ has attributed the development of the novel on her surroundings and the history of her hometown in relation to cults. She says;

My parents were California natives who were around the same age as Evie [narrator of Cline's novel, *The Girls*] in 1969, and their cultural touchstones became my touchstones. Even just in Sonoma County, where I'm from, there were dozens of communes and experimental communities, many of which still survive in some form or another, so 1969 never feels very far away. At the same time, I wasn't trying to make a precise record of 1969 – it was important that there weren't distracting anachronisms, but I was most concerned with making the book feel emotionally resonant.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Zeller, p. 172.

⁴⁸ Vance, Laura, *Women in New Religions*, (New York: NYU Press, 2015), p.87.

⁴⁹ Kathryn Bromwich, 'Emma Cline: It was exhausting even in fiction, to remember being a teenager,' *The Guardian*, (2017), < <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/may/21/emma-cline-it-was-exhausting-the-girls-novel-cult-granta>> (paragraph 2 of 17) [Date accessed: 05/09/2018]

The Girls is in fact a novel that brings the year 1969 to our present day, especially a single phenomenon which its plot is based on: the murders executed by The Manson Family, ‘a quasi-commune that arose in California in the late 1960s.’⁵⁰ The Manson Family which was led by the egomaniac Charles Manson and was made up of a mostly female follower base (who were manipulated by Manson), made headlines not long after August 1969 when they carried out two separate murders, stabbing their victims to death before using ‘their blood [...] to write slogans like “Pig” and “War” on the walls.’⁵¹ The three young girls, who were influenced and persuaded by Manson to carry out the murders were no older than twenty-one, all suffering with trauma as a result of their unstable family lives combined with the difficulties of being a teenager (of being self-conscious of oneself and of yearning to belong), similar to the girls in Cline’s novel (the similarity of the follower’s traumatised states, both in the real cult and in the novel’s non-fictional one, will be discussed later in this section). In *The Guardian* article Cline talks about her views on being a teenager and the trauma that this period can bring to an individual’s life. She says:

[b]eing a teenager is so much about extremes – everything is black and white, with very little room for nuance or reflection. You’re coming up against the adult world and trying to navigate your place in it. It was exhausting, even in fiction, to remember feeling that way.⁵²

It was this teenage vulnerability that she identified in the Manson’s girls that inspired Cline to write the novel. In *The Paris Review*, Cline expresses how she ‘became obsessed with the Manson girls.’⁵³

I stayed up late into the night, reading the different books, watching the scratched videos on YouTube. In the photographs I saw of the girls—pictures striking for the strangely domestic quality—I recognised something of myself at 13, the same blip of longing in their eyes.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Bowden, Jonathan, *Demons*, (Wermod and Wermod Publishing Group, 2014), p.42.

⁵¹ Cox, Bill G., *Crimes of the 20th Century: A Chronology*, (New York, Crescent Books, 1991), p. 233.

⁵² Bromwich, (paragraph 3 of 12) [Date accessed: 05/09/2018].

⁵³ Emma Cline, ‘See Me’, *The Paris Review*, (2014), < <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2014/03/17/see-me/>>, (paragraph 20 of 32) [Date accessed: 05/09/2018].

⁵⁴ Ibid.

The desperate longing to belong and the trauma that induces this yearning, is in fact, at the heart of *The Girls*, guiding the protagonist into a cult and causing her to be infatuated with it, terrified that they (the members of the cult) would ‘hurtle on without [her] and [she’d] have nothing.’⁵⁵ Cline emphasises the youthful naivety of the Manson girls in several of her interviews, ‘[t]hey were so young, and reading about their lives before they met Manson, it all seemed so familiar,’⁵⁶ she says. It is perhaps because Cline’s hometown is shrouded in a dark history of murderous cults and egomaniacal cult leaders which creates an atmosphere of prolonged trauma as California is forever cloaked with the images of the barbarous Manson family, that she chooses to create the protagonist and narrator that she does; one who seems to explain beautifully what Cline herself feels about the place she was born and grew up in. It is as if the 14-year old protagonist, who also lives in California as Cline does, is Cline herself as a youngster growing up, trapped in a world of trauma she cannot escape from, just because she is born in the location that she is. Evie, the protagonist of Cline’s novel describes her own as well as Cline’s California with the following words, as if pulling the words out of her creator’s thoughts (about her hometown) one by one:

I rarely saw anyone outside. The only teenagers in town seemed to kill themselves in gruesomely rural ways—I heard about their pickups crashing at two in the morning, the sleepover in the garage camper ending with carbon monoxide poisoning, a dead quarterback. I didn’t know if this was a problem born of country living, the excess of time and boredom and recreational vehicles, or whether it was a California thing, a grain in the light urging risk and stupid cinematic stunts.⁵⁷

The cult that engulfs *The Girls* has an eerie likening to the Charles Manson’s ‘Family’, not only because of the horrendous acts that the group executes but also in the trauma-infused pasts of the girls in the novel who bare a resemblance to the young female members led by Manson; they too, like the girls in the novel, find themselves cheated by life, alone in this world, in search

⁵⁵ Cline, Emma, *The Girls*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 2016), p. 271.

⁵⁶ Jane Mulkerrins, ‘How Emma Cline’s Family Inspired her Cult Novel on the Manson Murders’, The Telegraph, < <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/life/emma-clines-family-inspired-cult-novel-manson-murders/>> (paragraph 2 of 21) [Date accessed: 05/09/2018]

⁵⁷ Cline, p. 10-11.

of a place in which they could belong. This is also similar to the women in the cult of my own novel who feel as though life has been unfair to them as their children have been taken away, each due to different accidents. They too like the Manson girls and the young girls in Cline's novel feel lost, as though there is no-one they can share their trauma with, hence they find consolation in *The Grieving Mothers* where they feel as though they can, at the very least, be understood because they all know the pain that comes with losing a child, the prolonged mourning that seems never to ends and the sorrow that accompanies it. The only difference between the Manson girls and the characters of Cline's novel and my own novel, is that the women in *The Grieving Mothers* are from a large age spectrum, whilst some, like Chiara, are in their early twenties, others, like Natasha, are much older and in their forties, thus demonstrating that trauma can occur and affect anyone at any age.

All the girls in the 'Family' who participated in the gruesome murders that took place in the summer of 1969 were affected by their dysfunctional family lives which resulted in a life-long trauma that left them yearning for love and acceptance, much like Evie, who finds herself unanchored between her psychologically unstable mother who attempts to find consolation in material things, and her distant oblivious father who has moved in with his young beautiful secretary Tamar; the woman he has left Evie's mother for. Evie expresses her emotional vacancy and her desire for love and attention during this period with the following words;

I was so attuned to the attention. I dressed to provoke love, tugging my neckline lower, setting a wistful stare on my face whenever I went out in public that implied many deep and promising thoughts, should anybody happen to glance over.⁵⁸

Prominent Manson Family member Susan Atkin's family crumbled just like Evie's, although not exactly in the same way. The former's mother was taken by cancer while his dad subsequently drifted into alcoholism which quickly took away his life, leaving Susan 'alone, adrift, an emotional orphan with no larger family or community support in her time zone.'⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 27.

⁵⁹ Cashill, Jack, *What's the Matter with California? Cultural Rumbles from the Golden State and Why the Rest of us Should be Shaking?*, (New York: Threshold Editions, 2007), p. 38-39.

Linda Van Outen's parents also divorced when she was only thirteen, possibly causing her to experience 'acid, sex, pregnancy, and abortion'⁶⁰ by sixteen. The third of the Manson girls to experience trauma much like Evie is Patricia Krenwinkel whose parents were also divorced, resulting in her usage of marijuana to cope.⁶¹

The similarity in the traumatic experiences is not only limited to the girls in both the novel and the Manson cult, but can also be identified in the leader of both the fictional and non-fictional cult. This proves that trauma is vital for the establishment and flourishing of cults, regardless of whether it is a fictional or non-fictional one, as what brings all of the members together is their past traumatic experiences and their desire to cure their lack of love and aloneness which creates their traumas in the first place. Hence, by joining the cult all the members are aiming to cure their trauma or, at the very least, learn how to cope with it.

Charles Manson, named No Name Maddox on his birth certificate was the child of a mother, who led an unstable life, earning her living with petty crimes and prostitution, and an absent father who was supposedly called Colonel Scott (there are records that Manson may have seen his father a few times).⁶² K. Elan Jung documents an anecdote told by the five-year old Manson to his family members:

Mom was in a café one afternoon with me in her lap. The waitress, a would-be mother without a child of her own, jokingly told mum she'd buy me from her. Mom replied, "a pitcher of beer and he's yours."⁶³

Russell, the leader of the girls in Cline's novel, much like Manson has endured a loveless childhood that he tells Evie filled him with such hatred towards people and instilled in him a desire to gather all the 'traumatised' and lone individuals to create an 'all-accepting' loving circle, where he taught his followers 'how to discover a path to truth, how to free their real selves from where it was coiled inside them.'⁶⁴ In my own novel, the founder's, Lettaya's, trauma is what inspires the creation of the cult in the first place. Lettaya, whose daughter dies from cot death, one day sees a baby crawling past her front lawn and takes it in raising it as her

⁶⁰ Ibid., p.50.

⁶¹ Jensen, Vickie, *Women Criminals: An Encyclopedia of People and Issues*, (California: ABC-CLIO, 2012), p. 502.

⁶² Jung, K. Elan, *Sexual Trauma: A Challenge Not Insanity*, (New York: The Hudson Press, 2010), p. 198.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Cline, p. 98.

own, telling no one about what she has done (despite later finding out that the baby belonged to a family who passed away due to a fireplace accident). Attending collective grieving sessions where people who have experienced similar traumatic events get together and verbalise their traumas for closure, Lettaya thinks about creating a cult of grieving mothers with the idea that there will be no 'better place than a place that all grieving women can be together and share the pain that comes with losing a child.'⁶⁵ The child that she nurtures as her own is Eternity. Using Eternity's overactive, bizarre imagination (of creating and conversing with imaginary people) that comes with being a child she establishes the cult around her, claiming that she is able to connect with the world of the deceased, thus providing her with the title The Agent Between Life and Death.⁶⁶ So, like Manson and Russell whose sole aim is to establish an organisation that will fight against the world that has inflicted them with trauma, Lettaya's goal in forming her cult is to go against the physical order of the world by claiming that the world of the deceased is closer than we think it is, attainable in fact, hence setting up an order that will eliminate the trauma of the women who have lost their children, because if they are able to connect to their deceased children then there is no reason for them to be affected by trauma.

Russell, Manson, and Lettaya portray behaviours that appear to firmly tie their 'traumatised' followers to their cults, namely by focusing on the aspects of their follower's lives that have caused their traumas. For instance, according to Vickie Jensen, Patricia Krenwinkel in The Manson Family suffered from an endocrine system condition which gave her excessive body hair and prevented her from being able to lose weight, as a result her teenage years were tainted with low self-confidence and a reclusive persona.⁶⁷ Having met Manson at a party through a friend at only twenty years of age, she claims to have made love to him on the first day of their acquaintance and that 'Manson made her feel beautiful for the first time in her life.'⁶⁸ Krenwinkel's feeling of finally being 'seen' and 'noticed' is also shared by Evie during her first sexual encounter with Russell on the day she is introduced to him. She describes her discomfort at revealing her nakedness in front of Russell and his response to her reserved behaviour.

⁶⁵ Dengtash, p. 125.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Jensen, p.502.

⁶⁸ Lundskow, George, *The Sociology of Religion: A Substantive and Transdisciplinary Approach*, (California: Pine Forge Press, 2001), p. 290.

“Look at yourself,” he said whenever he sensed shame or hesitance. Pointing me toward the fogged mirror in the trailer. “Look at your body. It’s not some stranger’s body,” he said evenly. When I shied away, goofing some excuse, he took me by the shoulders and pointed me back at the mirror. “It’s you,” he said. “It’s Evie. Nothing in you but beauty.” The words worked on me, even if only temporarily. A trance overtaking me. When I saw my reflection—the scooped breasts, even the soft stomach, the legs rough with mosquito bites. There was nothing to figure out, no complicated puzzles—just the obvious fact of the moment, the only place where love really existed.⁶⁹

Evie has had enough of a life that offers no happiness due to her mother’s ‘swanning around the house like a stranger’⁷⁰ and her father’s ‘oddly formal questions’ over the phone, ‘like a distant uncle who knew me only as a series of second-hand facts. She is fourteen, she is short.’⁷¹ Due to a lack of love and attention she feels the need to tug her neckline lower in order to be noticed and smile indulgently at a dog showing competition when she is a child; a vacant feeling overcoming her when the show was finally over, ‘when no one needed to look at me anymore.’⁷² If anything her trauma stems from being perennially unnoticed, even by those closest to her. She is won over by something as simple as Russell’s positive words about her appearance. She is finally able to get the attention and recognition that she desires, feeling as though the cult is the only place that can offer love. The Grieving Mothers, like The Manson Family and Russell’s cult, also provides their followers with exactly what they need, addressing the areas that have caused them their trauma and attempting to resolve them with their principles. In The Grieving Mothers this is not done by providing their followers with endless love and embracing as is the case in The Manson Family and the cult in Cline’s novel, but by promising their followers contact with their deceased children. In my novel Betty expresses how The Grieving Mothers helps them cope with their trauma with the following word:

To be honest, I don’t think anyone is close to one another here. It almost feels like we rely on each other’s pains to make our own pain easier. Like knowing

⁶⁹ Cline, p. 189.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 28.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., p. 27.

that someone else has been through the same horrible experience makes your pain more bearable.⁷³

By targeting the areas that have resulted in their trauma and providing a platform where their followers' traumas are to an extent resolved all three cults aim to form a dependency in their members, making the followers feel that there is no other place that will understand them better. It is perhaps because 'cults seem to promise unconditional acceptance'⁷⁴ and security⁷⁵ that the followers of cults view the organisations that they are a part of as out-of-this-world, divine, almost utopic institutions. While Atkins from The Manson Family claimed to have had a vision where "“Charlie [as she referred to Charles Manson] was there alone. He was dressed in a long white robe. I immediately knew he might be God himself, if not, he was close to him”",⁷⁶ Linda Kasabian, another Manson Family girl claimed that 'Manson "could see inside her."⁷⁷ Russell's followers in the novel also portray a similar outlook toward him and his cult. Donna, a devoted member of the cult states that 'Russell was unlike any other human. That he could receive messages from animals. That he could heal a man with his hands, pull the rot out of you cleanly as a tumour.'⁷⁸ "“He sees every part of you,”"⁷⁹ Roos, another follower of Russell adds. Later in the novel, Evie describes the response of the girls of the cult when Russell enters the room they are all in; "“I saw everyone's faces condense with new life.”"⁸⁰ As James B. McCarthy states, it is 'the mystique of the cult leader [that] promises emotional salvation to [current] and prospective members, together with protection from negative feelings of shame and inadequacy.'⁸¹ Elaborating on McCarthy's quote in relation to the *The Girls*, even the infrequent appearances of Russell is enough to soothe the girls from their traumatic experiences, triggering within them a sense of awe, evident in the condensation of new life in their faces, and it is their longing for a life devoid of any negative feelings about themselves that pushes them into thinking that their leaders are divine beings, as magnanimous as Jesus, who offered

⁷³ Dengtash, p. 96.

⁷⁴ Pastva, Loretta, *Great Religions of the World*, (Minnesota: Saint Mary's Press, 1986), p. 235.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p.24.

⁷⁶ Chiasson, Lloyd, *The Press on Trial: Crimes and Trails as Media Events*, (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1997), p. 161.

⁷⁷ Jensen, p. 491.

⁷⁸ Cline., p. 99.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 193.

⁸¹ McCarthy, James B., *Death Anxiety: The Loss of the Self*, (New York: Gardner Press, 1980), p. 148.

salvation. Eternity, The Agent Between Life and Death, perhaps has the most important role in *The Grieving Mothers*, as the women depend on her to communicate with their children and it is only through her that the cult is actually able to operate successfully, as without her “powers” there would be no reason for the grieving women to stay in the cult. As Atkins sees Manson as a God-like figure and Donna in Cline’s novel claims that Russell is able ‘to see everything inside of you’, Eternity is also divine in the eyes of the grieving women, as they refer to her as their ‘Holy One’, bowing down every time she enters the room as though she deserves infinite respect and worshipping. They approach her every time they see her, asking her whether she’s had a vision, seen their deceased children. In their followers’ eyes Russell, Manson, and Eternity are divine and deserve immeasurable worshipping because they give them all that they yearn for and all that they are not able to obtain outside their cults.

As James Bill states:

Charles Manson worked with society’s least favoured, with young girls who had run away from dysfunctional families, or who had been driven away by physical and sexual abuse. He adopted not the central ideas of the revolution, but the marginilia—the clothes, the hair, the music—and used these to build a “family”, a cult of people who had abandoned normal life in order to whatever Charlie wanted. This cult he then used as a weapon against a bourgeois society that he felt had humiliated him, intending nothing except to cause pain, to cause harm.⁸²

Hence, feeling a part of the outer fringes of society due to the traumatic events he had endured such as his father’s abandoning of both himself and his mother, and his mother’s mingling with alcoholism and prostitution and subsequent inadequacy to be a ‘proper’ parent, Manson tried to lure individuals who were emotionally vacant due to trauma, just like himself, individuals who were looking for a something to fill in the void created by the loveless family lives. Russell shares Manson’s approach in aiming to attack the causers of his trauma with the aid of his followers who are also striving to beat the system and the people who have caused them so much trauma. “‘I’m like you,’” Russell says to Evie. “‘I was so smart when I was young, so smart that of course they told me I was dumb. [...] They taught me the word dumb. They taught

⁸² Bill, James, *Popular Crimes: Reflections on the Celebrations of Violence*, (New York: Scribner, 2012), p. 277.

me those words, then they told me that's what I was.'"⁸³ Russell's words seem so familiar to Evie, so close to her own experiences that as he talks she hugs herself with her arms, and claims that:

It all started making sense to me, what Russell was saying, in the drippy way things could make sense. How drugs patchworked simple, banal thoughts into phrases that seemed filled with importance. My glitchy adolescent brain was desperate for causalities, for conspiracies that drenched every word, every gesture, with meaning. I wanted Russell to be a genius.⁸⁴

Evie immediately feels emotionally connected to Russell due to their shared traumatic experiences of feeling unloved by those around them. Russell, much to Evie's delight, assures her that they are one and the same because of their trauma, and that he is willing to do all he can so that they can heal their trauma together by loving each other exclusively and through the simple act of showing an understanding for each other's pain. He says;

"There's something in you," [...] "Some part that's real sad. And you know what? That really makes me sad. They've tried to ruin this beautiful, special girl. They've made her sad. Just because they are."

[...]

"But they didn't ruin you, Evie. Cause here you are. Our special Evie. And you can let all that old shit float away."⁸⁵

As Russell acknowledges Evie's sadness and addresses it by showing an understanding and telling her that he knows exactly how she feels because he feels the same disappointment and distaste against the world too, he makes Evie wish that he were a genius. This feeling of depending so much on somebody who provides you with what you want, wishing that they have the capability of controlling life and knowing everything can also be seen in *The Grieving Mothers*, as the women state at every opportunity that Eternity *will* see their children, even when she has not in a long time. 'Maybe soon it will be my time and you'll get to see my Emma

⁸³ Cline, p.122.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p.122-123.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p.123.

my Holy One. You will see her, I'm sure. She's been departed for five months,'⁸⁶ says Chiara, when Eternity tells her that she has not had a vision in quite a while.

Russell similar to Manson is a social outcast, belittled and humiliated by those around him who make him feel like he does not fit into normal society. While he is told that he is "dumb", Manson learns that his mother is ready to sell him for a single pitcher of beer. As a trauma sufferer himself, Russell is aware that Evie is wishing to replace the emotional void inside of her with love and acceptance, thus he plays on it by emphasising that she is 'special', thus special to the people in the cult. He tells her to 'let all that old shit float away', expressing what she hopes to gain by joining the cult.

Evie is particularly attracted to the black-haired pretty girl in the cult, whom she will soon know as Suzanne. She instantly notices how she has control over the other girls in the commune, the way that they are together, the strange and raw look on her like 'flowers that bloom in lurid explosion once every five years, the gaudy, pricking tease that was almost the same thing as beauty,'⁸⁷ and the way that Suzanne's 'face answer[ed] all its own questions.'⁸⁸ Suzanne is instantaneously perfect in Evie's eyes; she is everything that Evie is not. While she is in search of attachment and belonging, even by just looking at Suzanne's she is able to see answers. "'And that was the difference between me and the black-haired girl —her face answered questions,'" says Evie.⁸⁹

Moreover, Suzanne has a big group of friends who are always with her, who look up to her and listen to everything she says. Evie thinks that by submitting to the ways of these girls and following their teachings, she will be loved and accepted and become a part of their fellowship. Evie's idea of Suzanne's cult is a clear depiction of what cults in general are known to do, as Harold Faw highlights, to 'provide lonely and unloved people with a sense of acceptance and belonging.'⁹⁰ For instance, when Evie meets Suzanne in person, Suzanne says: 'We've got somethings going on. But a lot of people in one place [...] means a lot of asses that need wiping. We're low on money, at this exact point, but that'll turn soon, I'm sure.'⁹¹ Evie

⁸⁶ Dengtash, p. 28.

⁸⁷ Cline, p.41.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 42.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Faw, Harold, *Psychology in Christian Perspective: An Analysis of Key Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 1995), p. 108.

⁹¹ Cline, p.73.

expresses her envy at Suzanne's use of the word 'we', which to her, reflects a sense of belonging and acceptance, a strong bond with those around oneself. Evie says:

We. The girl was a part of a *we*, and I envied her ease, her surety of where she was aimed after the parking lot. Those two other girls I'd seen with her in the park, whoever else she lived with. People who'd notice her absence and exclaim at her return.⁹²

Evie is fascinated by the idea of being missed when not present, of creating a void when not around, something that has never happened to her before, because her parents have always shown an obliviousness towards anything associated with her. For example, even after she's been through a difficult ordeal with the cult as they succumb to Russell's orders and carry out murder, the narrator, who is Evie as an adult, states how she expected her mother to 'notice the change in me even if Tamar or my father couldn't. The baby fat in my face disappeared, a hard scrape to my features. But she hadn't mentioned anything.'⁹³ By joining Suzanne's group of girls, Evie hopes to be noticed, a state that she lacks in her life and that she yearns for.

Janis Hutchinson claims that if two particular stages come into existence then the rise of a religious movement is inevitable. The first of these stages is the experiencing of 'lethargy, boredom, unrest, or a critical situation from which people need to be delivered.'⁹⁴ The second of the stages is when an individual feels 'a need to find meaning, purpose, and hope through change.'⁹⁵ Religion, (and what is meant by it in this dissertation, is the new belief systems created within cults that provides people with all that society cannot) gives the hopeless, the disillusioned, the alienated, and the trauma sufferer, as Marc Galanter writes, 'a special supportive, empathic, and confiding relationship,'⁹⁶ 'a special setting imbued with powerful symbols of [...] help, hope, and healing,'⁹⁷ and 'a special rationale, ideology, or indisputable

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Cline, p. 333.

⁹⁴ Hutchinson, Janis, *Out of the Cult and into the Church: Understanding and Encouraging Ex-Cultists* (Michigan: Kregel Resources, 1994), p. 117.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Galanter, Marc, *Cults and New Religious Movements* (Washington: American Psychiatric Association, 1989), p. 132.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

myth that explains normality and abnormality and renders sensible the individual's self-preoccupations and inexplicable feelings.'⁹⁸

By designating the events that leads up to Evie's admittance into the cult, we will be able to understand how trauma and the alienation and disillusionment that develops as a result of it, causes the thriving of a cult, and is one of the most vital factors in the establishment of cults. Elaborating on the first of Hoffer's stages in relation to Cline's novel, we are able to identify 'lethargy, boredom, unrest, [and] a critical situation from which people need to be delivered' (the critical condition in our case being Evie's trauma which shall be discussed in detail). The novel starts with Evie, as an adult, alone and unhappy of her current situation (she is temporarily living in the house of a friend who does not use the place, and is unemployed, penniless, and alone), recalling the events of her childhood which changed her life for good and left her permanently yearning for a life within a collective where she believes she would be understood and accepted. She particularly focuses on her relationship with her mother who, after divorcing her father, begins to show changes in her behaviour which results in a strained relationship between them, alienating Evie from home. Describing her mother, Evie states that

she'd stop doing a lot of things. Gone was the mother who'd made sure I bought new underwear every season, the mother who'd rolled my white baby socks as sweetly as eggs. Who'd sown tiny doll's pajamas that matched mine, down to the exact pearly buttons.'⁹⁹

Instead, she claims that her mother was 'ready to attend to her own life with the eagerness of a schoolgirl at a difficult math problem',¹⁰⁰ neglecting her own daughter for material things, like 'incense that came wrapped in aluminium foil', and 'drinking a new tea made from some aromatic bark',¹⁰¹ and a new friend called Sal whom she frequently meets up with late at night leaving her daughter at home by herself, while she discussed novel interests like 'acupuncture, of the movement of energies around meridian points. The charts.'¹⁰² Evie continues by stating that her mother 'kept changing, day by day', little things, like 'buying handcrafted earrings

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Cline, p.29.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid., p.32.

from women in her encounter group' and 'enamelled bracelets the color of after-dinner mints jittery on her wrists,' and 'lining her eyes with an eyeliner pencil she held over a lighter flame.'¹⁰³

Evie sees the divorce as a traumatic event for her mother, with her indulgence in materialism her coping mechanism. She identifies her mother's failure at love and her husband's adultery as a potential occurrence in her own future life by stating the following:

My mother must have known and stayed anyway, and what did that mean about love? It was never going to be safe—all the mournful refrains of songs that despaired you didn't love me the way I loved you. The most frightening thing: it was impossible to detect the source, the instant when things changed. The sight of a woman's back in her low dress mingled with the knowledge of the wife in another room.¹⁰⁴

Evie, wanting to escape the life that her mother is forced to endure, strives to leave her home for an alternative life that is full of happiness and acceptance, and is, at the very least, tolerable. She describes her life with her mother as 'familiar', emotionally unsatisfying, bland, and lacking any happiness. She says:

Because that was there even when love wasn't —the net of family, the purity of habit and home. It was such an unfathomable amount of time that you spent at home, and maybe that's the best you could get—that sense of endless enclosure, like picking for the lip of tape but never finding it. There were no seams, no interruptions—just the landmarks of your life that had become so absorbed in you that you couldn't even acknowledge them.¹⁰⁵

By comparing her life to the stubborn lip of a tape that one is unable to find, Evie is emphasizing her loss of hope and purpose in life; finding the lip would be a struggle, a near to impossible act, hence the inability to find the lip is a direct representation of her failure at taking control

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 30.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p.83.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p.32.

over her life. As she is unsuccessful at grabbing and unravelling the tape, her life is also an inescapable trap for her, resisting to divert into a positive direction.

Evie has the same distant relationship with her father who has moved in with his young twenty-something year old secretary, Tamar. Although Evie yearns to be close to her father, 'to reach for him across the seat, to draw a line from [herself] to the man who was [her] father,'¹⁰⁶ she is unable to do so, as she states that; his smile was like 'the helpless apology of a foreigner who needed direction repeated. My brain, to him was a mysterious magic trick that he could only wonder at. Never bothering to puzzle out the hidden compartment.'¹⁰⁷ Evie's parents have caused her unhappiness and implanted trauma within her for a very long time. She describes her loneliness in her childhood, especially times when she was left alone with 'nanny Carson who smelled damp and sat in the wrong chair. How they [her parents] told [her] that [she] was having fun all the time and there was no way to explain that [she] wasn't.'¹⁰⁸ She also recalls a time when she was lying on a hospital bed, her mother's hand on her feverish forehead and then her eventual disappearance as she walked out of her sick room and started talking to one of her friends on the phone, in a voice that Evie could not recognise.¹⁰⁹

Evie finds herself floating aimlessly between her neglectful selfish parents, particularly after their divorce, as they happen to be distracted with their own personal lives, and it is this seemingly endless floundering between her parents and the trauma she experiences as a result of it that leads her to long for a place where she can belong. She is desperate to be accepted into Suzanne's group, even though they have bad motives, as they persuade her to steal;¹¹⁰ an act that she carries out without too much convincing. Later she remembers this event with regret, pointing out that all the immoral things she did during her time within the cult was because she desired to belong, to be accepted. 'I like to imagine that it took me more time than that,' Evie says as an adult in regard to her eagerness to undertake criminal activities to please Suzanne. 'That I had to be convinced over a period of months, slowly broken down. Wooed as carefully as a valentine. But I was an eager mark, anxious to offer myself.'¹¹¹ The feeling of potentially being a part of something is much more important to her than any disruption or destruction she could possibly cause to other people's lives. 'I didn't want to go back to my mother, to the

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 272.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 271.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 37.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 68-69.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 156.

forlorn guardianship of my own self. I had the sense that if I let Suzanne go, I would not see her again,¹¹² she says, emphasising her fear of being left to wallow in misery in a toxically traumatic environment in the company of her mother. She has a constant urge to find something else that will fill the emotional void in her life, to eliminate ‘this absence in [her] that [she] could curl around like an animal.’¹¹³

Evie’s negative and fragile emotional state is an ideal one for the recruitment process of cults that generally target individuals who have had a recent traumatic experience which has placed them in a vulnerable mindset. Quoting Steven J. Breckler, James Olson and Elizabeth Wiggins, this is because the cult leaders consider these people to be ‘easier to manipulate than people who feel satisfied with their current lifestyle.’¹¹⁴ As Joseph H. Boyett states, ‘[w]hen people are in a weak psychological situation, they are highly vulnerable to anyone who comes along and offers to help them make sense of the situation.’¹¹⁵ An individual who responds to the ‘kind’ offerings of a cult that will ‘supposedly’ help them understand their bleak conditions, will be more prone to brainwashing; one of the most effective tactics used by cults, as it tends to become most fruitful in such ‘times of crisis, transition [and loss] in an individual’s life.’¹¹⁶ Kathleen Taylor defines brainwashing as ‘the dream of controlling other people’s beliefs and behaviour so effectively that they do not feel manipulated—as if the imposed beliefs were their own.’¹¹⁷ ‘Brainwashing typically begins by making the target person feel completely helpless,’¹¹⁸ states John O. Mitterer and Dennis Coon. However, if the certain individual is helpless to begin with they are already prone to be attracted to the cult’s manipulative system. This is because, as Mitterer continues ‘[w]hen the exhaustion, pressure and fear [in one’s life becomes] unbearable, change occurs as the person begins to abandon their former beliefs.’¹¹⁹

This acquiring of new beliefs and the forsaking of former ones once one joins a cult can also be seen in *The Grieving Mothers*, as the women, desperate to communicate with their deceased children, abandon their sense of reality in favour of believing in something as far-

¹¹² Ibid., p. 94.

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 93.

¹¹⁴ Breckler, Olson, Wiggins, p. 293.

¹¹⁵ Boyett, Joseph H., *Won’t Get Fooled Again: A Voter’s Guide to Seeing Through the Lies, Getting Past the Propaganda and Choosing the Best Leaders* (USA: AMACOM, 2008), p. 9.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Taylor, Kathleen, *Brainwashing: The Science of Thought Control* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. ix.

¹¹⁸ Coon, Dennis, John O. Mitterer, *Introduction to Psychology: Gateways to Mind and Behaviour* (Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2010), p. 549.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

fetched as being able to contact the dead. This total abandonment of former beliefs is also seen in Evie's eagerness to leave her broken family in order to become a part of something where she observes acceptance and belonging. Hence, Evie is open to the brainwashing that is going to be inflicted on her, as she is willing to cooperate with whatever actions Suzanne and her group carry out, going as far as stealing and murder.¹²⁰ Quoting Mitterer again, once the potential follower surrenders herself to the act of brainwashing it is 'a mixture of hope and fear, plus pressures to conform, [which] serves to refreeze (solidify) new attitudes exhorted by [the cult].'¹²¹ For example, in the first few days after Evie joins Suzanne's cult we see that Evie does not respond when Donna, another member of the cult, suggests that Evie is to be used as their offering, their sacrifice.¹²² Instead she thinks that 'even [their] brief history seemed to ratify [her] presence among them.'¹²³ With the fear that she will lose the love and affection she thinks she has found within the group if she does not obey, Evie is content with the arrangement of being used as a sacrifice. Not long after Donna's statement, Evie finds out that they are going to meet up with Russell, a major influencer of the doctrines of the group and the person they are going to sacrifice her to by forcing her to become his sexual partner.¹²⁴ She observes them on their way to Russell, the way they 'br[oke] into snippets of song like campers around a fire.'¹²⁵ It does not take her long to pick up their particularities, imitating the way they held hands without self-consciousness and dropped words like "harmony" and "love" and "eternity."¹²⁶ Although Donna's claim of making Evie a sacrifice for Russell, initially causes fear in Evie, as she does not know for sure what kind of sacrifice she is to be, it later pleases her, as she feels that they are integrating her into their lives.¹²⁷ She finally feels that she belongs and that she is not to suffer alone but can rely on those in the cult for love and affection.

As stated by Steven High and Catherine Baker, cults in general operate with the idea that 'pain and suffering need not be pathologized as an individual problem.'¹²⁸ Within the collective nature of the cult, the individual's suffering from trauma, which causes isolation,

¹²⁰ Cline., p. 70 and 215.

¹²¹ Coon and Mitterer, p. 549.

¹²² Cline, p. 96.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 98.

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 97.

¹²⁶ Ibid., p. 96.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Baker, Catherine, Steven High, *Beyond Testimony and Trauma: Oral History in the Aftermath of Mass Violence* (Ontario, UBC Press, 2015), p. 13.

disappears and the possibility of hope makes itself evident, as each individual gets the opportunity to be with others who like themselves are suffering from trauma and feel alone. High and Baker claim that when hope emerges in the individual who has entered a cult, the once despairing individual understands that 'they do not have to feel awful about themselves [...] [and that] they also like to laugh and re-discover the smile and the sense of humour they know they have.'¹²⁹ The emergence of hope as a result of the ambience of solidarity in the cult, can be seen in the *The Girls*, as Evie realises that she is not the only one striving for love and acceptance, but that there are other people who have joined the cult just to reach these two states that are lacking in their lives. Speaking of Suzanne, Evie says;

But we had other things in common, Suzanne and I, a different hunger. Sometimes I wanted to be touched so badly I was scraped for longing. I saw the same thing in Suzanne, too, perking up like an animal smelling food whenever Russell approached.¹³⁰

Evie, through the affection and solidarity shown in the cult, states that she is able to laugh, sing, and hold hands, things that she was not able to do before joining the cult.¹³¹ The Grieving Mothers, similar to Russell's cult also provides solidarity to its follower's as it provides a comforting platform for people who have lived through similar traumatic experiences, showing them that they are not alone, that there are others out there who have been through the same horrible experience which to an extent 'makes [their] pain more bearable.'¹³²

Evie's pleasure in receiving attention and the emotional relief that it provides her, allows her to distance herself from her previous life, thus from her trauma and loneliness. As she briefly passes through her neighbourhood after joining Suzanne's group she emphasises her delight in erasing all her memories from the past:

I may have smiled to myself as I watched the familiar pattern of the town pass, the bus cruising through shade to sunshine. I'd grown up in this place, had the knowledge of it so deep in me that I didn't even know most street names,

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 74.

¹³⁰ Cline, p. 182.

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 100.

¹³² Dengtash, p. 96.

navigating instead by landmarks, visual or memorial. The corner where my mother had twisted her ankle in a mauve pantsuit. The copse of trees that had always looked vaguely attended by evil. The drugstore with its torn awning. Through the window of that unfamiliar bus, the burr of old carpet under my legs, my hometown seemed scrubbed clean of my presence. It was easy to leave it behind.¹³³

She is happy to leave her hometown behind because it has failed to provide her with the care and love that the cult does. As Candy Lopitz states;

For the individual who has become disillusioned with life, is plagued with a pervasive sense of loneliness or depression or has precious little in the way of outside support, this personal attention [from the togetherness of the cult] can seem like a breath of fresh air.¹³⁴

The members of The Grieving Mothers also view the cult as a place where they can find emotional relief from the misery and disillusionment they have experienced on the outer world. This can especially be seen in the case of Chiara who sends her parents away when they come to pick her up from the cult house in the first weeks of her admittance into The Grieving Mothers, telling them time and time again that ‘staying here was a good thing for her, that it helped her carry on, that if she left she’d kill herself.’¹³⁵ So, like Evie, Chiara also finds great relief and pleasure in leaving her past life behind, as the cult provides them both with what they yearn for the most: belonging.

Cline uses first person narration to put across Evie’s trauma, as she writes her novel almost like an autobiography, as if Evie is the author seated at her desk writing her life story and trying to make sense of the events that have resulted in her forlorn, socially and psychologically disconnected lifestyle in the present. It is only through narration that Evie can give meaning to the events that have shaped her life into its present state. As Amos Goldberg states:

¹³³ Cline., p. 100.

¹³⁴ Lopitz, Candy Gwen, *Spiritual Battery* (Xulon Press, 2011), p.63.

¹³⁵ Dengtash., p. 96.

The fundamental principle in life-story and autobiography studies is that only through language can people give meaning to the events of their lives and constitute their identities, that is, by weaving those events into a narrative. In other words, there is a close affinity between the autobiographical text—as language, narrative, and narration—and the constitution and existence of a subject with a distinct identity whether people experience their lives as narrative or merely afford their lives meaning through narrative, they can only experience them through the act of narration, which entails the varying levels of cohesion and coherence that the story imposes on the plot, as well as the processes of thematization present in various aspects of the story, without which human experience cannot, in fact, be discussed.¹³⁶

Hence, Evie's existence is verified by the act of telling her own story, because so much of who she is today is dependent on her presence within the cult, events which she can only contextualise by the simple act of telling. In a way the novel can be viewed as Evie's diary, but in oral format, as it is told rather than written (the novel is written by Cline not Evie. It is as if Cline is documenting Evie's thoughts as Evie speaks.)

Goldberg claims that diary writing is a staple in the lives of those who have had extreme traumatic experiences, as the trauma sufferers, hence the 'authors of the diaries, sought to narrate in the first person, an extended and significant part of their lives.'¹³⁷ An example for such diaries are the Holocaust ones, written by Holocaust sufferers who were left to endure the terrible atrocities imposed onto them. Although it is unnatural and unjust to compare the Holocaust sufferer's trauma with that of Evie's, the point I am trying to make is that trauma instils in one the need to recount their 'extreme helplessness in the face of terror, and [or] the destructive and murderous forces acting from without. This helplessness (ostensibly) disintegrates the narrating subject, his or her narrative ability and the story itself.'¹³⁸

In *The Girls*, we see the disintegration of Evie's narrative ability as she is unable to openly recount a certain event (that took place during her time in the cult) due to the extreme trauma it caused not only to herself but to the society that it took place in (instead she provides

¹³⁶ Goldberg, Amos, *Trauma in First Person: Diary Writing During the Holocaust* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2017), p. 6.

¹³⁷ Goldberg, p.6.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

us with snippets of detail, like ‘the ring and pinky fingers of Linda’s left hand had been severed because she had tried to protect her face,’¹³⁹ and expects us to guess that it was a murder that had taken place). This traumatic event that Evie is incapable of putting into words is one that she learns of from the newspapers; the death of four people murdered by Suzanne and her friends on Russell’s orders. These four murdered individuals were connected to a man named Mitch, a music producer who Russell claimed had wronged him after refusing to release his album whilst initially promising to do so. Evie is disturbed by the events, having difficulty believing that the people who accepted her and welcomed her into their circle, the people that she enjoyed being around, the people of the place where she felt as though she belonged for the first and only time, could carry out such an atrocious act. But most importantly she thinks about what she would have done if she had been at the location of the murders while they were happening (Suzanne had thrown her out of the bus while they were on their way to Mitch’s house¹⁴⁰). Would she have taken part in the murders? Or would she have run away? Unable to fully understand how Suzanne, the girl she adored so much, could undertake such a vile attack, Evie says she wanted ‘to believe Suzanne kicked me out of the car because she’d seen a difference between us.’¹⁴¹ Then she thinks about the hatred Suzanne ‘must have felt to do what she’d done, to slam the knife over and over again like she was trying to rid herself of a frenzied sickness: hatred like that was not unfamiliar to me.’¹⁴²

Evie’s trauma comes from the possibility that she could have actively taken part in the murders if Suzanne had allowed her to continue on the journey to Mitch’s house with them. She wants to believe that she would not have, that she was not as monstrous as Suzanne that day, that there was a difference between them and that others could see that she was not capable of such an act, because it is only the opinion of another person that could convince her that she does not have the potential to become a murderer. However, deep down she knows that she would have been one of those girls, ‘slam[ming] the knife over and over again,’¹⁴³ eager to relieve herself from the hatred accumulated inside of her, because ‘hatred like that [like Suzanne’s] was not unfamiliar to [her].’¹⁴⁴ After she learns of the murders Evie recluses in her mother’s house, not wanting to have anything to do with the outside world, terrified of what

¹³⁹ Cline., p. 348.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 349.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

she is capable of, and disappointed that she was so close to evil yet did not know it. ‘The baby fat in my face disappeared, a hard scrape to my features. But she hadn’t mentioned anything,’¹⁴⁵ she says immediately after she finds out about the murders. Evie’s references to her changed physical attributes can also be credited to her changed emotional state.

After joining the cult, Evie has lost her childhood innocence that could be represented through the baby fat once present on her face, which has now been replaced with harder features, symbolic of adulthood. She has been forced to mature much too quickly for a 14-year-old. The fact that she does not vocalise her concerns and trauma to her mother but waits for her to notice the change in her goes hand in hand with her reluctance to speak about the murders in detail throughout the novel, just mentioning it in passing with a few quotes that I have used above about Linda’s fingers being severed and Suzanne ‘slamming the knife over and over again.’ Her experiencing of extreme trauma causes her narrative to disintegrate, as she is unable to recount her story as it happened. The novel’s first-person narration quality is a factor in the disintegration of the narrative, as Evie is unable to distance herself from her own story and imagine it as another’s. Perhaps a third-person narrative would have given Evie the necessary distance and perspective from her own story in order for her to be able to process her trauma as if it was being experienced by another person, and only then could we have received the full story without gaps in the narration. Quoting Dominick LaCapra, Andres Romero-Jodor states that

free-indirect style [...] is the proper style for the depiction of trauma narratives, as trauma itself cannot be approached directly, and its representation tends to involve a certain degree of indecisiveness. By using the free indirect style, the narration introduced a degree of uncertainty about who is narrating and who is experiencing the events that are being represented. [...] this uncertainty aims at creating the “plausible feel” that lies at the core of trauma narratives (and not a mimetic depiction of reality).¹⁴⁶

Interpreting Evie’s narration in light of Romero-Jodor’s quote, her first-person narration is merely mimetic, present, but not obvious and clear, hidden between the lines, the gaps providing

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 333.

¹⁴⁶ Romero-Jodor, Andres, *The Trauma Graphic Novel*, (New York: Routledge, 2017), p. 38.

the reader with a freedom to interpret and come up with assumptions about the events that are not openly stated.

The first-person narration quality of *The Girls* also gives it the feeling of a memoir, which Goldberg claims is a form of writing where the ‘writer’s life is generally described within the contexts of the events to which the author was a witness and a party’¹⁴⁷ and ‘tends towards historical documentation.’¹⁴⁸ This is different to a diary which tends to focus more on the ‘experience of the moment, the writer and the writer’s inner life.’¹⁴⁹ *The Girls* can also be considered a memoir as it chronicles the events of the time in which it is set in, namely the latter half of the 1960s, which bore witness to hippie culture at its height, and tragically ended with the gruesome murders carried out by The Manson Family. Evie is the epitome of the disillusioned unhappy youth of the time, who lived in an atmosphere of chaos and instability (The Civil Rights movement was taking place, presidents were being assassinated, the Cold War was at its peak, and the Vietnam War was continuing) much like the real-life Manson Family girls who also endured these events and also experienced the breakdown of their families as their parents divorced causing them to become emotionally distant (some even delving into substance abuse), as they found themselves unloved, with no support, and desperate to find love elsewhere. The psychological mindset of the youth of the time is demonstrated in a conversation between Sasha, the girlfriend of the son of the friend whose house Evie is staying at, and Evie herself; ““You just left your parents?” Her [Sasha’s] voice was admiring. “It was a different time,” I [Evie] said. “Everyone ran around. My parents were divorced.””¹⁵⁰ All the decisions that Evie gives, especially her admittance into the cult, stems from the trauma and loneliness she feels as a result of her parent’s divorce. The cult is an appealing place as Russell promises to ‘[teach] them how to discover a path to truth, how to free their real selves from where it was coiled inside them.’¹⁵¹ Much like Russell, Charles Manson himself claimed to have been a Christ-like figure whose sole purpose on earth was to help the needy.¹⁵² Since *The Girls* and the real-life cult it is based on has significant resemblances, the novel can be considered to be the fictionalised memoir of The Manson Family.

¹⁴⁷ Goldberg, p.12.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Cline, p. 144.

¹⁵¹ Ibid. p. 98.

¹⁵² Hewitt, Mark, Guillermo E. Mendez, *Charles Manson Behind Bars: The Crazy Antics and Amazing Revelations of America’s Icon of Evil* (New York: Page Publishing, 2013), p. 92.

The first-person narration gives the story a close-to-the-heart feeling, as if one is genuinely reading a memoir of a real person. It provides the reader with the ability to follow Evie's experiences and feel her trauma directly and gives us the opportunity to somewhat understand the psychology and ideology of the girls in The Manson Family, if one is to take Evie as a representation of all the girls. Goldberg claims that;

in most of the extensive body of first-person writing, the center of gravity shifts from the inner world of the individual's choices, feelings, achievements, expectations, hopes, deeds and passions (personal, intimate diary) to the whirlwind of external events and their overwhelming influence on the writer and on society in general (historical-documentary diary).¹⁵³

Evie's documentation of the events of her life, indirectly (as Evie being a fictional character cannot know that she is a representation of the Manson girls) brings to life the experiences of all the traumatised girls of The Manson Family, who found themselves alone as their once-stable families crumbled away. On the other hand, her chronicling of her experiences can also be a way in which she exercises introspection and attempts at self-understanding.

In contrast to *The Girls*, my own novel follows a close third-person narration. I chose to write in this particular voice as I believe that a first-person narration would have been too unnerving and claustrophobic for the reader since large portions of the story takes place in only two settings: the cult house and the care home. I believe that the third-person narration allows the reader to have some sort of distance from the strange arisings and stressful occurrences in the novel. We witness the events at the same time as Eternity, but we are not 'in her head' as I felt it was important to establish the difference between the world-as-it-is and the world as Eternity experiences it, and to leave room to contrast this.

Evie's effort of self-understanding through narration is reflected in the back and forth shifting in the story's timeline. The novel starts off with Evie as an adult recalling the events in the summer of 1969 when she was 14 years old. As Ron Charles states in a *Washington Post* article, the novel starts off with Evie's 'face blatant with needs while Vietnam burned and universities erupted, she and her best friend were cloistered away in Northern California Farm

¹⁵³ Goldberg, p. 13.

County, applying beauty tips and fantasizing about romance.’¹⁵⁴ The present day Evie feels alienated from society, living temporarily in the house of a friend until she finds a job. It is when she encounters her friend’s teenage son and his girlfriend, Julian and Sasha, who happen to turn up randomly at the house that she starts contemplating the state that she is in. It is their arrival that makes her remember her time at the cult that, although she directly does not state it, she believes resulted in the forlorn state that she finds herself in at present. ‘I’d recede in their minds—the middle-aged woman in a forgotten house—just a mental footnote getting smaller and smaller as their real life took over,’¹⁵⁵ says Evie, watching them leave. She continues:

I hadn’t realised until then how lonely I was, or something less urgent than loneliness; an absence of the eyes on me, maybe. Who would care if I ceased to exist? Those silly phrases I remembered Russell saying—cease to exist, he urged us, disappear the self. And all of us nodding like golden retrievers, the reality of our existence making us cavalier, eager to dismantle what seemed permanent.¹⁵⁶

She smoothly transitions from speaking about her newly-realised loneliness to Russell telling them to cease their existence, to disappear their self; sayings that she now realises did nothing to eliminate, or at the very least lessen, their trauma and their subsequent alienation from society, as she still feels the same alienation today. The present shifts from her initial meeting with Julian and Sasha, her friend’s son and girlfriend, and her eavesdropping on their sexual encounter in the room next to the one she is sleeping in to the section titled ‘1969’, when she describes her days in her hometown of Petaluma, thinking about teenage things with her friend Connie, like wanting to look older than her age. ‘I was fourteen, [she says] but looked much younger. People liked to say to me. Connie swore I could pass for sixteen, but we told each other a lot of lies.’¹⁵⁷ She then goes onto describe how her mother, whom was newly divorced from her father at this time, was planning to send her to boarding school after summer, the ‘impending departure forc[ing] a newly critical distance on [her] friendship with Connie.’¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁴ Charles, (paragraph 6 of 14)

¹⁵⁵ Cline., p. 132.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 26.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

Her world, in terms of family and friendship is on the path of falling apart, it is then that she feels alone in her fourteen year old world, making her particularly prone to being attracted by a cult that promises love and acceptance, and it is her admittance into the cult and her close proximity to individuals such as Suzanne and Helen, basically the girls of the cult whom commit murder, that makes her fear herself and causes her to distance herself from other people in her adult life. She says;

The sheets on my bed were mussed, the pang of fear still lingering in the room. How ridiculous I'd been. Being so frightened. But even the surprise of harmless others [Julian and Sasha] in the house disturbed me. I didn't want my inner rot on display, even accidentally. Living alone was frightening in that way. No one to police the spill of yourself, the ways you betrayed your primitive desires. Like a cocoon built around you, made of your own naked proclivities and never tidied into the pattern of actual human life.¹⁵⁹

As Evie's narration plunges into the past and then into the future she is able to unravel the cocoon of safety (a barrier from the outside world) around her and, process the events that she has experienced in the past, understand the impact that they have had on her present life and make changes for the better. The improvement in her life is evident in the last pages of the novel as she is at the very least able to somewhat relax as she walks past a 'normal' man on the beach, smiling back at the 'normal' man, 'like you would smile at any stranger, any person you didn't know,'¹⁶⁰ she says. Through storytelling she is able to become a 'normal' person.

Unlike the timeline in *The Girls*, my own novel follows a chronological one as contrary to Evie who requires a back and forth shift between certain vital periods of her life (like her time in the cult, her initial abandoning of the cult, and her life as an adult) to come to an understanding of why she is in the state she is at present, my plots depends on Eternity's journey from a limited memory to slowly acquiring information about herself by the simple act of observation. In order to see Eternity's development in memory and to not reveal the plot twist at the end (where it is disclosed that Hannah who fakes that she is an old friend from the outer

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 20.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 355.

world is in fact part of the cult house and was the very person who was trying to drown her in the river) a chronological timeline is a must.

This section explored how a novel based on a real-life cult dealt with the concept of trauma. It compared the trauma of the character's in the novel to that of the members of The Manson Family from which Cline took inspiration from for *The Girls* and identified similarities in their desire to overcome their trauma by joining the cults in question. Additionally, it also discussed the different and similar ways trauma is dealt with in *The Girls* and *The Grieving Mothers*, as well as the different writing styles (voice and structure of plot) adopted by both me and Cline to form a narrative that revolved around trauma. By doing so this section demonstrated the porous line between the fictional and non-fictional status of cult doctrines that are based around trauma, thus portraying how trauma is the greatest instigator not only in the emergence of cults but also in their flourishing. In the next section I will be discussing *After Me Comes The Flood*, a novel set in a cult-like organisation, exploring the strong sense of trauma in its plot, hence once more highlighting that trauma is vital for stability and structure within a cult.

CHAPTER 3 EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TRAUMA AND CULT-LIKE BELIEF SYSTEMS: SARAH PERRY'S *AFTER ME COMES THE FLOOD*

After Me Comes The Flood, much like *The Girls*, explores the way trauma weakens human judgement, alienates the individual from “normal” society, leaving them emotionally-distant from their immediate surroundings and in search of somewhere to fit-in. It is filled with characters so different in personality and background yet unified in their traumatic sufferings, showing a dependence on each other for traumatic relief, as each character knows that the other is well-acquainted with the disillusionment that comes along with trauma, even though the traumatic experiences they have endured are different. The novel is set in a large house, whose inhabitants are all ex-psychiatric institution patients who have left ‘voluntarily’ and show an unwillingness to continue their lives away from one another by moving in together. Although not set in a cult like the other two novels that I have chosen to analyse, I believe that *After Me Comes The Flood* is well-suited for this dissertation as the small society that functions in the novel is cult-like, thriving from the trauma of its occupiers and living around intangible established doctrines. Additionally, the novel shares elements with my own novel, *The Grieving Mothers*, with its inclusion of trauma-induced memory loss and amnesia that in turn nourishes the foundation of a cult. This section will explore trauma and its role in maintaining and strengthening the order of a cult by discussing the traumatic experiences of the characters in Sarah Perry’s novel, as well as my own. It will also display how our characters’ frail psychological states binds them to the cult-like organisation at the centre of the plots that promise security, love, and acceptance.

The novel begins with a diary-like account from the protagonist John Cole who tells the reader that he is writing secretly in an infrequently visited room in the retreat that he finds himself in after his car breaks down while on a journey to his brother’s house. Nearby to where he is stranded is a seemingly desolate woodland which he wanders into, finding a house that he describes as being ‘the most real and solid thing I’d ever seen, and at the same time only a trick of my sight in the heat.’¹⁶¹ Here, he is taken in by a ‘child-like’ girl (as he himself describes

¹⁶¹ Perry, Sarah, *After Me Comes The Flood* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2015), p. 7.

her)¹⁶² who addresses him by his name and behaves as if they have been waiting for him all along. He describes his meeting with the child-like girl as the following;

She told me to drink up, although the country water tasted disgusting to me. Perhaps I grimaced, because she said, ‘I know—let’s have tea!’ and began to run the tap. The sound of water in the stone sink reminded me why I’d come, and all over again I started to try and explain. But she wasn’t listening—I might as well have been an animal she’d found on the steps. She said, ‘I’ve got to look after you, you see. They said: make sure he’d got everything he needs, and I said: I can do it you know, I’m not stupid.’ I still felt light-headed and could hear bells ringing in my ears, and comforted myself with the idea that the girl, the stone sink, the kettle in my hands, were not real, nor anything at all to do with me.¹⁶³

We learn that there is an unexpected heatwave in England where the novel is set, and it is this suffocating heat that causes a ‘confusion and aimlessness’¹⁶⁴ in John, who almost forgets what he set out to do and nearly fails to recall who he is. John welcomes the house’s inhabitants’ warm greetings, (‘Finally’¹⁶⁵ says the older woman of the house when she first lays eyes on John) but is frequently haunted by the guilt of deceiving them every day of the one week he is with them, especially after he discovers that they have confused him with somebody else with the similar name of Jon Coules whom John speaks to coincidentally on the phone and whom tells him that he is to be at the house soon but is running late.¹⁶⁶ John shows great pleasure in the earnest embracing by the inhabitants of the house, and I can perhaps attribute his delight of being accepted to his solitary life and the emotional detachment and trauma that he feels as a result of it. Highlighting his loneliness John says;

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ibid., p. 8-9.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 17.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 22.

Outside the streets were eerily quiet, and it was the thirtieth day without rain. People had begun to leave town in search of places to hide from the sun, and sometimes I wondered if I'd go out one morning and find I was the last man left. [...] I'd imagined customers on the steps of the bookshop peering in at the window, wondering what had kept me, knowing I am never late—but of course no-one was waiting. No-one ever is.¹⁶⁷

John's yearning for companionship and the unhappiness that he feels due to a lack of it, as expressed in the quote above, is a state that he cannot get over as it causes a large emotional gap in his life. He repeats his despair of being without company throughout the novel, at one point claiming that, '[a]ll the same my headache had receded a little, so I stood and did a few futile little tasks, waiting for someone to come, though I think I knew no-one would.'¹⁶⁸

His feeling of desolation is heightened by the disorientation caused by the prevalent heatwave, as he feels as if he is encircled by a curtain of heat that further distances him both mentally and emotionally from his surroundings. 'Twice I walked up and down the road before I found my car, feeling the heat beat like a hammer on the pavement, hardly knowing one end of the street from the other,'¹⁶⁹ he says, expressing his inability to fully comprehend the road that he uses every day.

John's trauma arises because he is left to lay eyes on the strange sights brought on by the heatwave; the dead pigeon that had died on its back in the gutter and the voice of a child he hears singing 'we all fall down' from a derelict building which he later notices is 'empty as if no-one had lived there for years.'¹⁷⁰ It is these occurrences that causes him to panic and become yet more disorientated, his 'stomach clenched like a fist', 'a sour taste in [his] mouth as if [he'd] already been sick.'¹⁷¹ He describes his agony and trauma induced by his strange surroundings:

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 2-3.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., p.5.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., p.5-6.

My heart beat with a kind of fury that repeated itself with a new pain in my head, and I couldn't move my hands on the wheel—nothing about me was doing what it ought and I felt as though I were coming apart in pieces. Then I thought I was losing my sight and when I realised it was nothing but steam coming from under the bonnet I shouted something—I don't remember what, or why—and gritted my teeth, drifting on to a byroad where the traffic was sparse and slow.¹⁷²

Perhaps it is his baffled state induced by the traumatic images that he sees on his journey that causes him to eagerly allow himself to be welcomed into the bizarre house by the eerie girl who seems to him a child at first but who he is soon to notice is a grown woman, as he desires the company of another in order to eliminate, or at the very least lessen, his feeling of disorientation through the act of belonging. He stays in the house despite the 'dozen meat hooks hanging from their chains' in the large vaulted ceilinged room the woman guides him into.¹⁷³ When the woman tells him that she 'must' look after him, John is unable to understand why a stranger would be so kind to him, insistent in fact to take him in and take care of him.

John views the uncanny events that he experiences as an illusion caused by the distortion of his reality due to disorientation induced as a result of the intense heat. Aware that under normal circumstances he should 'have been afraid of the strangeness and the dark and the insistent child, and those appalling meat hooks hanging from their chains,'¹⁷⁴ he is nonetheless intrigued by the absurdity and chooses to continue as if nothing is out-of-the-ordinary because when he recalls his flat, 'with its empty window on the empty street, and the shop's clock ticking slower than any other clock [he'd] known,'¹⁷⁵ he cannot help but remember the loneliness that he felt in his life before finding the house and uncontrollably tells himself that in his own home there 'was nothing—there was nobody there.'¹⁷⁶ He chooses the attention and sense of togetherness the retreat provides him over his forlorn life back at his home. This idea of eagerly accepting to become a part of a collective to belong, regardless of whether one feels

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid., p. 8-9.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., p.10.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., p.23.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

entirely comfortable or not, can also be seen in the last three chapters of *The Grieving Mothers* when Eternity returns to the cult house after escaping the care home. Although she understands that she has been deceived by the people that she thought were her friends when she encounters Hannah at the House for the first time, Eternity still asks, almost begs, to stay in the cult. ‘Can I at least stay for the night? [...]. I’ll leave as soon as I can,’¹⁷⁷ she says to Hannah, even after she finds out that Hannah was trying to kill her because she was taking over the cult. When a few minutes later, Hannah and Denise change their minds and ask for her to come back after she has settled into the garden of the house next to the cult house, Eternity although still doubtful about whether they will harm her, agrees to go back without much persuading. Traumatized by her memory loss, and lonely as a result, as she does not remember if she has other true acquaintances apart from the ones in the cult, she perhaps accepts the offer of joining The Grieving Mothers once more because she yearns to belong. It is only through belonging that she feels as though she can cope with her trauma.

The retreat in the novel can be taken to represent a cult, much like Russell’s group in *The Girls*, as using Vensus A. George’s definition it is

a social group of likeminded people which gives each of its members a sense of belonging, we can say that it is a representation of the way in which cults attract their followers by promising acceptance and solidarity, and a path to healing trauma.¹⁷⁸

As Jeffrey C. Alexander states ‘social groups [...] not only cognitively identify the existence and source of human suffering but may also take on board some significant responsibility for it.’¹⁷⁹ The childish girl’s keenness to take John in and look after him, is in essence an identification of his trauma and disorientation and a subsequent desire to take responsibility for it by incorporating him into their collective. This feeling of belonging and togetherness is what attracts John to the group. Similar to the way in which the childish girl, to an extent, owns

¹⁷⁷ Dengtash, p. 192.

¹⁷⁸ George, Vensus A., *Paths to the Divine: Ancient and Indian*, (Washington DC: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2008), p. 122.

¹⁷⁹ Alexander, Jeffrey C., *Trauma: A Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), p. 6.

John's trauma by offering eagerly to look after him, The Grieving Mothers as a cult, and through its establishment, takes responsibility for the women's traumas by bringing them all together so that they can rely on each other's pain and see that they are not alone in their suffering.

John's desire to stay within the retreat can be seen in a short conversation with Alex, the young man who is an inhabitant of Hester's home:

'Oh—didn't see you there—turned up all right, then? I hope it's not too much for you, shut up in here with us all...' [says Alex]. He gestured around the table and they all laughed, affectionately but also too loudly, as though they were indulging a child who'd spoken out of turn. I [John] said that no, of course it wasn't too much [...].¹⁸⁰

Nothing is too much for John in the house, not even the fact that he is amongst a group of overly-kind, smotheringly nice people he has never seen before. Later, when he has time to think, he realises that he has deceived all the people in the house whom he understands thinks he is someone else entirely. Trying to comprehend the reason for his treachery, he considers a few potential factors: 'confusion or drink [...] [or the] kindness to the girl who'd welcomed him in,'¹⁸¹ and then 'admit[s] that no-one had forced his hand,'¹⁸² but that he entered using his own free will, because he was yearning for acceptance and willing to leave his previous lonely life behind him.

All the people at the retreat are bound together because of their psychological frailties and traumas, as their union starts at a psychiatric institution called St. Jude's where they were all admitted to. One day Alex comes to the realisation that he is no longer himself because of the pills that he is forced to take at the institution. As he sits counting them, he thinks about 'how he'd felt each crack in the pavements and pebble in the grass through the soles of his shoes, and the blood coursing through each separate artery and vein,'¹⁸³ before he had taken the

¹⁸⁰ Perry, p.20.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., p.24.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid., p. 134.

tablets. However, after being forced to take the pills his senses were muted and as Perry writes, '[h]e fell to wondering if he were really there at all.'¹⁸⁴

Alex starts pretending that he has swallowed the pills but instead stuffs them into his pillows and 'begin[s] to persuade the others to do the same.'¹⁸⁵ He teaches the other inhabitants of St. Jude's 'sleights of hand and tricks to deceive the staff at breakfast and supper, and collected their pills, green and white and yellowish, in the pockets of his jeans.'¹⁸⁶ After a while, without the help of the pills the patients start showing signs of change in their behaviours. For instance, 'a young man who had a compulsion to wash scrubbed himself raw with a wire pad he found in the kitchen and was treated by doctors for the wounds on his hands.'¹⁸⁷

Such similar events cause an instability in the organisation of the institution and the doctors admit that they have failed to maintain order and agree to let the patients go with Hester's—the owner of the house that John finds himself in—persuasion whom uses her forceful character to gain permission. Alex, Elijah, Hester, Walker, Eve, and Clare move out into Hester's home together, unwilling to separate from the solidarity that they managed to find together at St. Jude's; the solidarity of knowing that their trauma is understood by the other. 'And something altered, and in the end every boundary was crossed, every mark was overstepped, and we all left together,' says Elijah to John, explaining their eagerness to move out together. 'Alex, Clare, Eve and me. It was Hester's doing, as things so often are. It's a lonely place this, with all the rooms empty, and she told them '[s]end others, if they need it; if they're not ready to be alone,' continues Elijah, describing the way Hester dealt with the situation of bringing them all together in order to create a home of traumatised individuals who could soothe each other's concerns by the simple acts of acceptance and understanding.

George Lundskow claims that

[people] seek out groups to which they can belong, and the groups they join offer them the one thing they want most of all: unequivocal acceptance. People who join cults –or at least those who become core members—willingly

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 134-135.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 135.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

surrender their sense of self because in exchange they receive total acceptance. They also gain a clear sense of purpose and meaning.¹⁸⁸

The members of Hester's home thus move in together because they have a past together at St. Jude's and know of each other's traumas, accepting them without demanding any change. They are also reluctant to part ways and are disinclined to establish a compulsory new identity that they would need in order to be able to integrate into 'normal' society if they were to separate. Since they have already surrendered their identities to the pills that are given to them at St. Jude's, they enter Hester's home as the selfless individuals that they already are, and they are at peace at knowing that the construction of a new identity is not required of them. Thus, their decision to relocate together stems from their knowledge of maintaining the 'unequivocal acceptance' they already had at St. Jude's. In terms of accepting one as one is, the cult in my novel differs from Hester's retreat as it actually asks for its members to acquire new names in order to fully own the order in the House. Betty says: "To be honest, I'm not even sure what my own name is, having not used it in a long time."¹⁸⁹ The renaming is a form of suppressing the previous way of living, and by previous, I mean the follower's life before joining the cult. By doing this, the cult's senior members are aiming to eliminate any traces of the previous life from the cult member, treating them as a blank slate which they could manipulate easily and fill with all sorts of information that will keep them a loyal member of the House. Betty's claim that she does not remember her name because she hasn't "used it in a long time," suggests that she may have forgotten other details from her previous life in the 'outer world.' Forgetting her old identity, she has embraced her new one. Thus, while the characters in *After Me Comes The Flood*, are already blank slates when they enter Hester's retreat, having abandoned their original identities to the pills given to them at St. Jude's, the characters of *The Grieving Mothers* are asked to abandon their selves as soon as they agree to become a member of the cult. In both novels, there is a need to surrender the original selves in order to be able to leave behind the trauma.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁸ Lundskow, p. 299.

¹⁸⁹ Dengtash, p. 106.

¹⁹⁰ This idea of abandoning one's original identity is also adopted in monasteries and convents in mainstream religions, particularly Catholicism. [Haynes, Jeffrey, Anja Hennig, *Religious Actors in the Public Sphere: Means, Objectives and Effects* (New York: Routledge, 2011), p.155.]

As Lundskow states, by joining a cult, individuals also ‘gain a clear sense of purpose and meaning.’ Each of the members of Hester’s home have an unresolved trauma that they have experienced and that they have been unable to come to terms with, hence they all rely on each other’s company to overcome, or at the very least, tolerate the pain that accompanies their trauma, knowing that the other is or has endured the same kind of traumatic pain as oneself. For instance, Elijah’s trauma emanates from his loss of faith in Catholicism. As a pastor who has dedicated a large part of his life showing others the road to salvation and peace, and guiding them on the road to find God, his revelation that religion is a ‘lie’ comes as a shock to him. Elijah tells John about his disappointment at coming to the realisation that he has wasted his life on preaching religion with the following words:

‘I wasn’t always like this, you know. I was a pastor, I was respected...’ [...] [...] ‘How can I explain? It was as if I were coming home after a long day, tired and hungry and with aching feet. And there at the end of the road was my house and all the lights were on. And there was the front door I painted and beside it the bay tree I planted the day my daughter was born. But when I tried my keys they wouldn’t turn in the lock, and there were faces at the window but they were strangers and they all turned away.’¹⁹¹

Elijah loses his faith after a conversation with his daughter which causes him to question the relevance and truthfulness of the Bible. His daughter points out that ‘be not afraid’ is quoted 365 times in the Bible, for each day of the year, apart from a single day in a leap year. Elijah is forced to contemplate the reliability of the Bible after the realisation that ‘[w]hen winter was gone on too long and we’ve forgotten the feel of the sun, there’ll be one day when there’s no word of comfort from God,’¹⁹² as he says to John. Elijah comes to an awareness that his God which he believed in so devotedly, whom ‘counted the hairs on his head, watched him sleeping, helped him put one foot in front of the other without falling over,’¹⁹³ had in fact failed to be beside him that one day of the year.

¹⁹¹ Perry, p.30.

¹⁹² Ibid., p. 156.

¹⁹³ Ibid., p. 154.

Elijah is unable to passionately preach to his followers as he once did after his weakened belief in God. Perry writes that

He avoided his fellow patients, not out of distaste but in case the sadness in him would prove contagious, and instead took command of a deep-seated chair set between two windows, where he sat for hours reciting silently the hymns he'd once sung, beating out their melodies with restless hands.¹⁹⁴

Observing Elijah's detachment from religion and subsequent trauma because of this dispassion, a priest working at the same church that Elijah ordains at recommends St. Jude's claiming that he (Elijah) was 'unsuited to being alone but had no desire to talk to the faithless.'¹⁹⁵

Explaining Elijah's story to John, Hester states that once admitting himself into St. Jude's, meeting herself and the others there, and then relocating into her mansion-like house, Elijah 'was over the threshold [and] never went out again.'¹⁹⁶ Although still traumatized by his loss of faith, the loss of the years that he believes he wasted for a religion that in the end failed him, and his estrangement from his wife and children who are devoted Catholics, Elijah is nevertheless happy at Hester's home, coping with his trauma and trying to forget that his world might just collapse one day 'without purpose or meaning.'¹⁹⁷ He is OK in Hester's home because there are others around him who are trying to deal with their own traumas which to an extent assures him that he is not alone in his suffering.

The sharing of trauma and suffering and the feeling of comfort stemming from being understood is expressed by Alex in a conversation with John; 'I know what it takes just to leave everything,' he says, 'not to do what they tell you to do, but you're not on your own. And I'll help you, if I can—oh, you don't want to talk about it, I understand.'¹⁹⁸ Alex offers to help John understand his trauma. Where once there was a confusion and suffering brought on by trauma, there is, after joining a cult, an understanding of trauma, a collective embracing, as one meets

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 127-128.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 127.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 158.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 155.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 51.

and shares stories with individuals who have experienced similar terrorising events and who are equally in search of order and meaning in their lives. The Grieving Mothers just like Hester's retreat and cults in general, provide people who have experienced different events but have endured similar pains with a space where they can lean on each other and be consoled just by knowing that there are others who have suffered because of the same sad occurrence (the death of their child) as they themselves have. For instance, as is the case in Hester's retreat where the members are from different backgrounds and have endured different experiences, the followers of The Grieving Mothers, although bonded through the death of their children, have all had dissimilar encounters. For example, in my novel we have Keira who is an ex-satanic cult member and Chiara growing up in a violent household. Nevertheless, they all find themselves in The Grieving Mothers and depend on each other for hope and comfort. This is the case in Hester's retreat too, as discussed above.

Much like Elijah who finds peace at the retreat, John is also unwilling to leave as he does not want to return to his lonely life at his home where he visualises 'the rush mat with three pairs of shoes neatly paired alongside, and the bookshelves as ordered as those in the shop.'¹⁹⁹ There is nothing awaiting him back home, and although he awaits 'relief and longing for home,'²⁰⁰ neither comes. The confinement of the retreat and the feeling of having others around to spend time with is appealing to John. He feels needed and wanted at the retreat, far away and safe from the loneliness of his past life. As Elizabeth R. Burchard and Judith L. Carlone claim, 'most of us [human beings] share three fundamental human needs: love, significance, and security. Cults, under the guise of legitimacy, purport to fill them.'²⁰¹ John feels all three at the retreat. At one point in the novel he emphasises his delight at being needed with the following words:

When I lifted my head and saw Alex a little distance away, I was glad: he at least seemed to see me directly and clearly, and even to have need of me—not as he thought I was, but as I am.²⁰²

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 54.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Burchard, Elizabeth R., Judith L. Carlone, *The Cult Next Door: A True Story of a Suburban Manhattan New Age Cult*, (New Jersey: Ace Academics, 2005), p. 2.

²⁰² Perry., p. 159.

John is glad to be needed as it gives him the sense of having some significance. At the retreat he is finally able to be himself, without the need to warp his personality to please those around him. Hester's home also gives its residents another fundamental human need: security. The feeling of safety that the cult-like retreat provides is best expressed by Alex in a conversation with John, 'But there it feels safe,' he says, referring to the retreat, 'as if nothing can make it through the forest to where we are. Do you see?'²⁰³ The idea of being safe within a cult is perhaps one of the most important factors a member considers before entering the organisation. Having suffered through traumatic experiences the member enters the cult with the desire to escape the world that has caused them pain and misery. Alex's claim that the retreat provides them with an environment where nothing bad can get to them 'nothing can make it through the forest to where we are' is similar to the belief system in The Children of God cult, where the members joined together and aimed to keep 'The System' at a distance; 'The System' being 'the political, educational, social and religious institutions of modern society'²⁰⁴ as Terry C. Muck, Harold A. Netland, and Gerald R. McDermott write, that, David E Van Zandt states, resulted in capitalism, greed and in return gave rise to wars and trauma.²⁰⁵ Although The Grieving Mothers live in a rather busy area, with 'normal' society all around them, like The Children of God and Hester's retreat they too strive to keep the outer world at a distance in terms of direct involvement (they have no contact with the outer people whatsoever, shying away from conversing with anybody who is not from the cult). "'We're not allowed to mingle with outer people. They don't understand us, and they are harmful. If we are to go into the outer world we go together, and we make sure that we protect one another,'"²⁰⁶ says Betty to Eternity, highlighting their strict principles of keeping the outer world, that caused their trauma in the first place, at a distance.

The retreat creates an environment of belonging and understanding that allows its residents to considerably distance themselves from their past traumatic lives, even causing them to become attached to it to such an extent that they would choose not to leave even if they were being forced out. 'The next morning he'd have been startled and offended if anyone had stopped

²⁰³ Ibid., p. 54.

²⁰⁴ McDermott, Gerald R., Terry C. Muck, Harold A. Netland, *Handbook of Religion: A Christian Engagement with Traditions, Teaching, and Practices* (Michigan: Baker Academic, 2014), Chapter: The Family International: Theological Exchanges, Current Issues, paragraph 1. Ebook

²⁰⁵ E. Van Zandt, David, *Living in the Children of God* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 5.

²⁰⁶ Dengtash., p. 26.

him at the door to his room and said, ‘But what on earth are *you* doing here?’²⁰⁷ writes Perry in regard to John’s strong attachment to the retreat. John is reluctant to go back to a life filled with emotional and physical emptiness. As Jacqueline V. Lerner, Jordan M. Lerner, and Jordan Finkelstein state; ‘Cults offer [...] people a place to belong, and recruiters convince these [...] people that they will be helping themselves find salvation and an emotional [or sometimes physical] home.’²⁰⁸ The retreat, although not having technically recruited John as he finds himself there by chance, nevertheless provides him with an option of salvation, hence a chance to forget his old life that has caused him nothing but loneliness and misery. Hester expresses the aim of the retreat in relation to the transformation she observes in John with the following words: ‘I’ll know I’ve failed, if you don’t feel more peaceful now than when you came. It’s why you’re here, isn’t it? And you know we’ve all been saying how well you look.’²⁰⁹

By giving John a warm welcome, the retreat has opened the doors of both an emotional and a physical home for him, one of which he is strongly attached to. At one point, when he feels that he has deceived the residents of the house for too long, he contemplates leaving, but does not want to do so before ‘memoris[ing] every detail of the house, as he’d once memorised poems to be recited in front of a class of boys he never came to know.’²¹⁰ Emphasising John’s reluctance to leave the retreat Perry writes:

Alone again in his ordered flat, would he remember what he’d seen and heard?
Surely he’d forget the flight of steps and the green door, the blue lights in the
blue room where they are, and the lichen that crept across the terrace stones?²¹¹

John observes his surroundings, looking at everything intently because he does not wish to forget his time at the retreat; a time that brought him happiness and belonging.

²⁰⁷ Perry., p. 80.

²⁰⁸ Lerner, Jacqueline V., Richard M. Lerner, Jordan Finkelstein, *Adolescence in American: N-Z* (Denver: ABC-CLIO, 2001), p. 180.

²⁰⁹ Perry., p. 174.

²¹⁰ Ibid., p. 165.

²¹¹ Ibid.

Even when Alex appears to have kidnapped a child at a riverside outing they all go on, and the child's mother accuses him of doing so when he comes back with the child who is covered in sores and cuts, John sides with the members of the retreat. As the mother grabs her child's hand and turns to face the residents of the retreat who all stand close together by the river, John states that '[b]y then I'd crossed the battle line and stood with Alex and Hester, feeling the force of her rage pulling me in with them.'²¹² When the woman extends a pen and paper at them to obtain their details for a possible visit to the police station, John wants to tell her that she's mistaken, 'you must be—I never knew anyone less capable of harming a child.'²¹³ It is because the cult provides John with salvation, 'the deliverance from the griefs, pains, and sorrows common in this life, and entrance into an ideal state of conscious [and] happy [...] existence'²¹⁴, that he feels so attached and so close to the people of the house in such a short time to the point of overlooking obvious shortcomings and even crimes. As Andrew Breitbart states, cults (including Hester's retreat), flourish by promising 'freedom from worry, from illness, from negativity'²¹⁵ and by delivering on their promises. John's strong attachment to the retreat is a fictional example of this. Another fictional example of Breitbart's claim can be found in my novel where the cult provides the women with freedom from worry as they have access to their children through Eternity, freedom from negativity as the cult gives them the hope of connecting with the children they thought that they had lost forever, and by delivering on their promise of helping them contact their children through Eternity's visions (that, although are absent from the novel, are implied to have taken place before the timeline of the novel—"You always have,"²¹⁶ replies Betty when Eternity asks her whether she is able to speak to the deceased children.)

Eve is another member of Hester's retreat who joins because of her desire to relieve herself from the trauma that she suffers as a result of her parent's overprotectiveness. Living close to Alex and his sister Clare during her teenage years, she compares her life to that of her neighbours and envies them bitterly. Expressing Eve's thoughts about her life before joining the retreat Perry writes:

²¹² Ibid., p. 112.

²¹³ Ibid., p. 113.

²¹⁴ Robertson, Irvine, *What the Cults Believe*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), p. 21.

²¹⁵ Breitbart, Andrew, Mark Ebner, *Hollywood Interrupted: Insanity Chic in Babylon—the case against celebrity*, (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2004), p. 109.

²¹⁶ Dengtash., p. 62.

Alex—whom the school forgave long absences on account of his feckless mother, whose sister mirrored him so beautifully, who spent summers in a house as deeply forested as anything built by the brothers Grimm—had the life she knew ought to have been her. She dutifully studied; Alex cheerfully failed. She could not be absent an afternoon without a worried father; Alex came and went as he pleased. [...] How was it possible to attain greatness when her mother bought a pair of china dogs to flank the fire with its three electric bulbs, and her father was afraid to enter restaurants?²¹⁷

Passionate about playing the piano, Eve is saddened by the fact that her parents do not support her in her musical endeavours. When she leaves her parent's house to join Hester's retreat, Eve states that her parents were 'relieved to be spared her scowl, and her hands that mutely practised Chopin on the plastic tablecloth,'²¹⁸ thus highlighting her parent's distaste at her interest in music. Eve declines the first time she is invited to stay at Hester's, but accepts the next invitation as one of the residents of the retreat (it is not specified who) promises her that 'Hester says the piano's yours'.²¹⁹ Once given the opportunity to create endless melodies on Hester's piano, Eve realises that her musical creations are 'so frightening, so sublime, so terrible,'²²⁰ reflecting the suffocating emotions that rule her inner world. Eve feels grateful that Hester's retreat provides her with access to the object that connects her to life: the piano. 'Over the long summers that followed, Hester's other visitors, their numbers dwindling instinctively sought permission from the frowning green-eyed girl [which is Eve] before they raised the piano lid',²²¹ writes Perry, expressing the authority given to Eve over her much-loved piano at the retreat. Hester's retreat, much like *The Grieving Mothers*, provides its members with the emotions or objects that they desire, thus helping them overcome their trauma. The members are strongly bonded to the retreat because they are given what they have been yearning for.

Memory loss or the distant recollection of events out of the time they are experienced in are two effective literary methods Perry uses in the novel to portray the way in which cults

²¹⁷ Perry, p. 148.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Ibid., p. 149.

²²¹ Ibid.

destroy the self and the ego in order to take control, often using the individual's trauma as a means to distort their memories. For instance, when Alex is confronted by the members of the cult about whether he had in fact touched the child he had 'seemingly' kidnapped, he says that he cannot remember 'beating his forehead with a bunched fist, then sagging slightly against Hester's shoulder.'²²² Another example of memory loss or disjointed memory is the fragmented state of John's thoughts when he first enters the retreat and is dumbstruck by the inhabitants' warm welcoming. John describes his disjointed and unreliable memory with the following words:

Sometimes they spoke to me, saying, 'Isn't it better now, without the sun, and wouldn't you be glad if it never rose again?' or 'The salt, John, would you mind?' and then seemed to forget I was there. I remember it all in fragments: the blackhaired young woman taking her companion's cigarette and drawing so deeply her eyes ran, but refusing to cough; amber-haired Clare leaning her head on Hester's shoulder and instantly sleeping; the tap-tap-tap of the older man's fingers on the chair.²²³

Through the quotes above we are able to see the disintegration of the self and the ego, as the members of the retreat are merely shells, unable to make sense of time and space. As Andrew Breitbart and Marc Ebner express:

Ego destruction is actually a part of the formula for a cult mindset [...] By tearing down the members' ego and critical thinking faculties, cults begin to do the members' thinking for them. All the responsibility for one's thoughts and actions are turned over to the group's leader. Members don't have to think for themselves.²²⁴

²²² Ibid., p. 111.

²²³ Ibid., p. 19.

²²⁴ Breitbart, Ebner, p. 109.

Elaborating on Breitbart and Ebner's claim in relation to Perry's novel the act of taking away one's critical thinking abilities can be identified in the novel through the letters that Hester writes to Alex under the pseudonym Eadwacer. In these letters Hester tells Alex about impending disasters, especially floods that will bring an end to human life. Alex, who is terrified of dying takes these letters seriously, having nightmares whenever he sleeps of 'everyone [being] carried away by the water.'²²⁵ John catches Hester storing the letters away one day and immediately understands that she was the penning the letters and instilling a fear in everyone for a long time. John confronts her about her actions and asks her whether she is not ashamed about what she has done: 'It's so stupid, so spiteful,' he says to her. 'So like a child... But no—a child would be ashamed; might do it once, perhaps—but not over and over again.'²²⁶ 'Oh I've been ashamed all along. But after a while you get used to the shame and it becomes part of who you are,'²²⁷ she replies. Hester states that scaring Alex with images of floods putting an end to the human race is not the worse act that she has undertaken. She says: "'Not just this... I've made him believe he does things, says things, and can't remember... I even let him think he might have hurt that child—after all, perhaps he did.'"²²⁸

Hester's justification of her actions is her idea that 'he was going to leave [her]!'²²⁹ She claims that

[h]e was getting better, every day he was here. Everything I did for him made him go a little further away, and I realised that soon I wouldn't be hearing his voice in the hall, or coming up from the garden. Then one night I found him sleeping out by the reservoir, because he'd tired himself out from swimming, and I realised that as long as he was just a little afraid, he'd need me. There's no other reason.²³⁰

²²⁵ Perry, p. 180.

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Ibid., p. 181-182.

²²⁹ Ibid., p. 182.

²³⁰ Ibid.

Although Hester tries to keep Alex in her retreat, because she is somewhat in love and obsessed with him, she nevertheless exhibits the overprotective controlling behaviours of cult leaders over their members, through which they aim to bind their members to their cult and encourage its growth and flourishing. By targeting the incidents and emotions that are most likely to rekindle the events that caused the individual's trauma initially, cult leaders try to break down the self and ego of their followers and eliminate any hope of being able to overcome upsetting experiences on one's own. After demoralizing the member and instilling in one a fear on his/her most sensitive matters, cults offer a system of support and solidarity to conquer the bad feelings induced by the organisation itself. This can be seen in the Church of Scientology's auditing sessions, which is a process that 'aids' the follower of Scientology to 'travel to higher states of spiritual awareness'²³¹ by answering 'exact sets of questions asked or directions given by an auditor to help a person locate areas of spiritual distress.'²³² During the auditing sessions Scientology members are encouraged to reveal all past and present events that have in some way caused them negative emotions such as guilt, distress, or humiliation. The aim of the auditing sessions is to acknowledge these negative experiences and reach a state of closure by attaining spiritual awareness. As stated by Ryan Buxton, 'the Church of Scientology keep in-depth records on everything its members say during private "auditing" sessions and then use their secrets against them.'²³³ Hester similarly uses her knowledge of Alex's past traumas that she learnt whilst they were all staying at St. Jude's to undertake an event, in this case to pen letters anonymously, in order to rekindle the pain he felt from his traumatic experiences, and strengthen his devotion to the cult, the only place he feels safe in. Alex's trauma stems from his fear of collapsing buildings and structures that would cause drastic outcomes and kill people by the thousands. He is in fact admitted into St Jude's because he

had almost broken his shoulder, throwing himself against the stanchions of a bridge near his home—possessed with fear that its narrow concrete pillars

²³¹ 'What is Auditing?', *Official Church of Scientology website* < <https://www.scientology.org/faq/scientology-and-dianetics-auditing/what-is-auditing.html> > (paragraph 1 of 10) [Date accessed: 11/09/2018].

²³² 'The Auditing Session', *Official Church of Scientology website* < <https://www.scientology.org/what-is-scientology/the-practice-of-scientology/the-auditing-session.html#slide7> > (paragraph 2 of 6) [Date accessed: 11/09/2018].

²³³ Ryan Buxton, 'Inside Scientology's Auditing Process: How Members are Pushed to Reveal Their Private "Sexual Indiscretions"', *Huffington Post*, < https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/03/30/scientology-auditing_n_6971680.html > (paragraph 1 of 8) [Date accessed: 11/09/2018].

couldn't bear the weight of traffic, he'd tried to bring it down one night when the roads were quiet.²³⁴

Using his constant state of fear induced by his past traumatic experiences, Hester convinces Alex ('I [make] him believe he does things', she says.) that he in fact did kidnap the child with an ulterior bad motive. Alex is devastated by this revelation, he sits in the corner of the kitchen with 'his knees up under his chin, pressing himself against the kitchen wall as if he wanted to seep into the bricks and plaster.'²³⁵ John who is a witness to the scene notices that 'Hester didn't look angry that he'd been accused of something so unthinkable, or afraid the woman had seen something in him that had passed the rest of us by.'²³⁶ Instead he says what he saw in Hester

was a long slow look of satisfaction, like a woman who'd come to the end of a day's work sooner than expected. Then she smiled, and it wasn't the sudden unfeigned smile that comes when you least expect it, but a kind of smirk.²³⁷

Hester has finally attained what she has wanted all along; she has broken down Alex's self and ego and as a result strengthened his devotion to the retreat, by instilling in him a fear of the outside and the people that live in the outer world and showing him that it is only at her retreat that he can find safety and peace in. The Grieving Mothers also operates on creating a fear about the world beyond the House's confines, thus indirectly encouraging their followers to form a relentless devotion to the cult itself. "'They don't understand us, and they are harmful. If we are to go into the outer world we go together, and we make sure that we protect one another,'"²³⁸ says Betty to Eternity, highlighting how when compared to their own system, which is 'protecting', the outside is entirely the opposite, harmful and not a place to go out to on your own. By doing this, like Hester's cult, The Grieving Mothers aims to show their followers that they can only reach harmony and security by staying in the cult.

²³⁴ Perry., p. 129.

²³⁵ Ibid., p. 116.

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Dengtash., p. 26.

Perry uses a number of literary techniques to convey trauma and portray how it sustains organisation within the cult, much like Cline does in her novel as discussed in the previous section. The first of the techniques is the shifting point of view between section breaks and chapters. The change does not follow a pattern, but the reader is given the chance to enter John's mind occasionally (every few sections) through 1st person narration in order to be able to get a rounded idea of his trauma-infused thoughts, the way they affect his actions prior to joining the retreat, and the impact they have on his decisions after becoming a member of Hester's retreat.

The novel begins with a first-person account from John who is sitting in an empty sparingly-used room at Hester's retreat, writing in an empty notebook that he has found, trying to make sense of the events that seem to him too surreal. He writes:

I've never kept a diary before—nothing ever happens to me worth the trouble of writing it down. But I hardly believe what happened today, or what I've done—I'm afraid that in a months' time I'll think it was all some foolish novel I read years ago when I was young and knew no better.²³⁹

Through his lamentation we understand that he is attempting to put his uncanny experiences into context; by writing them down he aims to make them real or at the very least to make them seem real to him. He continues by writing that;

Underneath it I've written my own name, because if I ever find this notebook again I'd like to be certain that it's my handwriting recording these events, that I did what I have done, that it was nobody's fault but mine. And I'll do it again, in braver capitals than my name deserves: JOHN COLE, underlined three times.²⁴⁰

²³⁹ Perry., p.2.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

The events that lead up to his entrance into the retreat—a child, he never sees, singing ‘we all go down’ in a building that seems like it has been vacant for a long time, a massive mansion-like house hidden in the middle of a woodland with no other signs of habitation around, the girl who gives him a warm welcome as if she knows him for a long time and who seems to him a child at first but is in fact a young lady, the meat hooks hanging in the first room he is led into in the retreat, and the inhabitants embracing him like they had been acquainted for years—causes in him such a disillusionment that he is even in doubt of his own existence, hence he feels the need to write his name in bold letters, underlined three times, because the act of writing helps him contextualize his situation and place it within the real world. In *The Grieving Mothers*, Eternity also chooses to process her trauma caused by the memory loss to understand her surroundings (that are new to her since she has no recollection of her life prior to waking up on the river) and to make sense of her situation of finding herself amongst a group of women she does not remember but who seem to worship her. In my novel, Eternity thinks that ‘[w]riting ma[kes] everything real somehow. [...] Writing made things make sense.’²⁴¹ So, she decides to bullet-point everything that conjures in ‘her an emotion, a scent that she remembered from before, a colour, the feel of a material maybe.’²⁴² Like John, it is only through the act of writing that she is able to gain some perspective over her life, to comprehend exactly where she fits in the events that are taking place around her. It is perhaps only then that they can both understand that they are real.

Through John’s 1st person narration we are given the opportunity to peak into his past life and compare it to his present in the retreat, thus we are able to get a close-to-the-heart account of the events that led to his quick adaptation into the Hester’s home (that promised him solidarity and belonging) and the impact the retreat had on his life. We hear him think in the novel, complaining about his past lonely life. He says:

And all the while I remember also the last I’d seen of my flat, with its empty windows on the empty street, and the shop’s clock ticking slower than any other clock I’ve known. The I heard myself say, as if it was someone else’s

²⁴¹ Dengtash., p. 14.

²⁴² Ibid.

voice in another room: ‘Oh, nothing, it was nothing—there was nobody there.’²⁴³

We learn that he finds emotional relief from his prior loneliness in the retreat. ‘There was nobody there’ he says of his home whereas the retreat is full of people who seem happy to accommodate him. ‘I’ve got to look after you, you see. They said: make sure he’s got everything he needs [...],’²⁴⁴ says the child-like girl, Clare, when he first enters the house.

The chapters that are written in third person provide the reader with a different perspective of not only John’s trauma but also of the other inhabitants of the retreat which we are not informed of in John’s first- person narration. Despite the third person narrative quality of these sections we are given a close account of the character’s thoughts, almost as if we are an entity placed in their minds. These chapters give the reader the opportunity to take a glimpse at the traumatic experiences that led the other individuals in the novel into Hester’s home. For instance, we acquire knowledge of Eve’s traumatic experiences prior to admitting herself into the retreat, about her overprotective father who worried if she was absent for an afternoon, and her unconventional socially-anxious parents who ‘bought a pair of china dogs to flank the fire with its three electric bulbs, and her father was afraid to enter restaurants’,²⁴⁵ and their lack of encouragement in her passion for the piano. Hence, whilst through the first-person narration we get a heartfelt account of John’s trauma and his gradual integration into the retreat that causes him to relieve or, at the very least, cope with his trauma, the third person narration provides the reader with the ability to learn of the trauma-filled stories of the other characters. We learn that what binds all the characters of Perry’s novel together is that they have all endured a traumatic event in their past lives before joining Hester’s retreat and that they are eager to distance themselves from the environment in which they experienced these events. The chapters in Perry’s novel that use third-person narration do not follow the mindset and thoughts of the character’s directly, but instead give us snippets from the particular characters’ lives (for instance we learn of Eve’s issues with her parents), thus aiding us in understanding the reason behind their admittance into Hester’s home. The third-person narration in my novel on the other

²⁴³ Perry., p. 23.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 9.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 148.

hand follows Eternity's point of view entirely and aids the reader in following her journey of self-discovery, as she tries to understand her position in the House and life in general. Perry and I choose a different approach when using voice perhaps because our intentions are different, while Perry's aim seems to be to give us an idea of the type of institution John finds himself in (John is the main character and protagonist of the whole novel), what is central to my own novel is Eternity's approach to dealing with her memory loss, and the journey she takes when trying to do so.

Perry's novel is told over a single week, the novel starting with a chapter titled 'Wednesday' and ending on a 'Tuesday'. The breakdown of the story into chapters, each focusing on a single day provides the readers with the ability to follow John's journey into and out of the retreat, allowing us to see the transformation of his trauma and the way in which the retreat helps to soothe his trauma caused by his loneliness by providing him with a sense of belonging within 'a social group of likeminded people.'²⁴⁶ As Perry starts off with John's diary account, I believe that she intends us to enter his mindset, follow his journey in and out of the retreat, hence he will be the focal point in my discussion of how the novel's chapter separation into days helps demonstrate the retreats positive effect on his trauma.

Prior to his entrance into the retreat, as discussed above, we see that John is a disillusioned being and is lost, as he is disoriented by the stifling heat and the breakage of his car. He is terrified of being the last man in the world, more precisely of being lonely, and he states, rather unhappily, that he is in fact alone as 'no-one is waiting. No-one ever is.'²⁴⁷ When his car falters and he finds himself on the edge of a woodland, which eventually leads him to Hester's mansion, it is perhaps the emotional void caused by his loneliness that allows him to be taken into the retreat without having to be persuaded, despite the meat hooks and the child-like girl who is overeager to help him. On 'Wednesday', the first day of his admittance into the retreat, John states that;

I ought really to have been afraid of the strangeness and the dark and the insistent child, and those appalling meat hooks hanging from their chains, but

²⁴⁶ George, Vensus A., *Paths to the Divine: Ancient and Indian*, (The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy: Washington DC, 2008) p. 122.

²⁴⁷ Perry, p.2-3.

instead it all seemed so absurd, and so like something in a novel, that I began to laugh.²⁴⁸

He also lies on his first day, claiming to be Jon Coules, who was to be admitted into the retreat and whom the residents of Hester's house mistake John to be, just so that he would be given the chance to stay at the retreat which had welcomed him so warmly.

On his second day at the retreat, 'Thursday', John starts forgetting the feel of his home, which indicates that he is slowly leaving his past behind. Expressing John's feelings on the day of an outing with all inhabitants of the house, Perry writes:

How easy it would be to leave them [the inhabitants of the retreat] then, with none of those inept excuses he'd dreamed up in the night. He imagined pushing open the door to his flat, and seeing inside the rush mat with three pairs of shoes neatly paired alongside, and the bookshelves as ordered as those in the shop. He waited relief and longing for home, but neither came.²⁴⁹

Here Perry describes John's hasty detachment from his own home and his quick adaptation to Hester's house. John spends a day at the reservoir with Alex, and listens to him open up about how he'd like to come to the reservoir to watch waterfowl, and as he described to John all the things he wanted to do down at the reservoir 'he began to swallow and stumble over his words until [John] couldn't follow what he way saying.'²⁵⁰ John feels emotionally connected to the people of the retreat. The sharing and exchanging of stories makes him feel as though he belongs and to an extent takes away his loneliness, as he is incorporated and made a part of their feelings and thoughts.

On 'Friday', Perry writes that John would 'have been startled and offended if anyone had stopped him at the door to his room and said, 'But what on earth are *you* doing here?''²⁵¹

²⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 10.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 54.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 68.

²⁵¹ Ibid., p. 80.

emphasising his pleasure at staying at the retreat. The members of the retreat all go on a trip down to the river on the Saturday, where Alex disappears for a while along with a child whose mother is frantically searching for him. When the child does not reappear and the woman realises that Alex is absent too, she starts accusing him of kidnapping her child. John finds himself contemplating the possibility that Alex may have done such a thing, nevertheless he states that '[b]y then I'd crossed the battle line and stood with Alex and Hester, feeling the force of her rage pulling me in with them.'²⁵² Perry writes that it did not take him long to consider telling the mother that: 'You're mistaken; you must be—I never knew anyone less capable of harming a child.'²⁵³ John has only been at the retreat for three days when he utters these words, and it is perhaps surprising to hear him say them at all since it is difficult to understand how he could have gotten to know a person's personality so well in only three days. Yet, the fact that Alex opened his heart to him the previous day, the warmth and sense of companionship he felt in place of the loneliness of his past life, encourages him to defend Alex, and as a result fully incorporate himself into the cult. A day later we find that John is almost desperate to be noticed by Alex. 'When I lifted my head and saw Alex a little distance away, I was glad,' he says, 'he at least seemed to see me directly and clearly, and even to have need of me—not as he thought I was, but as I am.'²⁵⁴ Alone in his past life and so having no one to need him, John finds joy that Alex 'sees' him. It is through the act of carrying out a task that is asked of him by the members of the cult that makes John feel that he has fully become one of them. As Bill Hybels, Kevin Harney and Sherry Harney state:

Initially, most people are attracted to [...] cults because they are looking for love. Most of the people who hook up with those types of groups come from loveless families. They have few friends, if any. They're drifting aimlessly. They're crying out for a little love somewhere.²⁵⁵

²⁵² Ibid., p. 112.

²⁵³ Ibid., p. 113.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 159.

²⁵⁵ Hybels, Bill, Kevin Harney, Stacey Harney, *Lessons on Love*, (Michigan: Willow Creek Association, 1996), p. 65.

Elaborating on Hybel's and Harney's claim in regard to John, I can state that he has a brother called Christopher whom he appears not to see very regularly (in fact he gets lost on a journey to his brother's house) and is not very close to, and thus finds the love that he yearns for from the members of the retreat.

The next day, exactly five days after his admittance into the retreat, we find that John is planning to leave, unable to continue living with a group of people that he has deceived by faking his identity. Perry writes:

The changing sky made him ill at ease, certain he could not sustain the deceit another day and would soon be leaving, he wanted to memorise every detail of the house, as he'd once memorised poems to be recited in front of a class of boys he never came to know. Alone again in his ordered flat, would he remember what he'd seen and heard? Surely he'd forget the flight of steps and the green door, the blue lights in the blue room where they are, and the lichen that crept across the terrace stones?²⁵⁶

John wants to remember every detail of the retreat because it is the only place that has ever provided him with an environment of belonging and acceptance. By recalling the details of the house after he leaves he will be able to relive the happiness he felt in Hester's home, and perhaps carry some of the joy of his present life into his life out of the retreat. John's determination to cling to his memories within the retreat perhaps justifies Hester's following claim: 'I'll know I've failed, if you don't feel more peaceful now than when you came. It's why you're here, isn't it?'²⁵⁷ It seems as though the retreat has accomplished what it has set out to do (to provide lonesome individuals with a supportive environment) as Hester continues by stating that 'And you know we've all been saying how well you look. Just get rid of that dreadful beard and you'd look a boy again!'²⁵⁸ John seems to have had a change not only in his emotional state but also

²⁵⁶ Perry., p. 165.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 174-175.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

in appearance, even reverting back to the innocent, naïve, and ignorantly happy state of childhood.

On ‘Tuesday’, his last day at the retreat before he leaves, John is portrayed as slowly walking away from the retreat whilst saying each of the inhabitant’s names one by one, as if he is desperately trying to embed their names into his memory prior to his exit. ‘One by one he said their names aloud as though to leave them there, and went down the gravel path towards the dripping green-lit canopy ahead,’²⁵⁹ writes Perry. The passage of time in the novel, separated into clear chapters of days, shows the reader how John’s trauma is healed or, at the very least, made tolerable, as Hester’s retreat (which in this thesis was taken to represent a cult) provides love and acceptance, and fulfils its promise of bringing personal transformation.²⁶⁰ In my own novel, I chose to separate my chapters in a conventional manner, as *Eternity* does not progress mentally in the same way that John does. Unlike John who clearly gets better with each passing chapter, *Eternity*’s mental issues are resolved very slowly and suddenly at the end of the novel when the act of murdering Hannah brings back memories.

In this section I analysed the novel *After Me Comes The Flood* and discussed my own novel alongside in relation to how cults maintain a strong structure and ensure their growth by targeting the needs of their traumatised followers, by providing a loving and safe environment with plenty of understanding and a solid sense of acceptance. I also explored the literary techniques Perry uses to address her characters’ traumas, comparing them to the methods I use in my own novel. While the organisation in Perry’s novel was not exactly a cult, but more a cult-like organisation in terms of structure, the subject of the next chapter, Eleanor Wasserberg’s novel *Foxlowe* has a fictional cult that houses the traumatised at the heart of its plot.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., p.231.

²⁶⁰ Irwin, Harvey J., *The Psychology of Paranormal Belief: A Researcher’s Handbook* (Hertfordshire: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2009), p. 52.

CHAPTER 4 THE USE OF TRAUMA IN FICTIONAL CULTS: ELEANOR WASSERBERG'S *FOXLOWE*

Foxlowe, by Eleanor Wasserberg is a novel that takes its name from the house it is set in. It is inhabited by eleven individuals, a mixture of nine children and teenagers and two adults (the latter of whom claim to be the leaders of the house). The residents call themselves the 'Family—a "new better kind of family"'.²⁶¹ There are Green, Blue, October, Toby, Ellensia, Dylan, Liberty, Pet, Egg, Valentina (who leaves the house very earlier on in the story) as well as the two founders and current leaders, Richard and Freya. This chapter will focus on the trauma of the inhabitants in Foxlowe and the way in which the leaders of the cult form their cult doctrines to address their follower's traumatic states by providing them with an environment of safety much different from the outside world that has caused them nothing but suffering, resulting in their admittance into the house in the first place. In conjunction with *Foxlowe* I will be discussing my own novel, exploring the differences and similarities between the two novels in terms of how the cults in each thrive by targeting the traumas of their followers. I will also be analysing the literary techniques used by both myself and Wasserberg to create stories that flourish on the traumas of their characters.

Foxlowe is in essence a cult, where the children are strictly forbidden to enter the world on the other side of the barbed wired wall surrounding the house, repetitively told that the outside is 'disgusting, illegal,'²⁶² a place termed the 'Bad' and somewhere that needs to be avoided. 'The Bad can force a helpless one to do anything,' says Freya. 'Imagine the worst you can. Outside, people will twist knives into flesh, pull off one another's skin. Eat each other.'²⁶³ What bounds the inhabitants of the house is the fear of the 'Bad' that Freya describes to them at every opportunity, the tragic effect that it can have on their lives. Whilst some have never seen the outside (like Green who seems to have been born into the cult, and is subtly hinted to be Freya's hidden child) and others entered the boundaries of the house when they were too young to remember the 'Bad' (like Blue who was brought to Foxlowe one day as a new-born wrapped in a blanket), some of the characters in the novel have admitted themselves into the

²⁶¹ Wasserberg, Eleanor, *Foxlowe* (London: Fourth Estate, 2016), p. 49.

²⁶² Ibid., p. 49-50.

²⁶³ Ibid., p. 25.

cult because of the outside world's negative impact on their lives. Hence, Foxlowe is a haven to them, a safe spot, where they can run away from, or somewhat cope with the trauma's inflicted onto them in the world outside its boundaries. As Foxlowe is a heaven-like environment for its followers, the house of The Grieving Mothers is a refuge for them too, as it provides them with a platform where they can distance themselves from the outer world that has given them tremendous pain and misery (since this was where they lost their children).

Valentina is one of the individuals who enters the cult as a young adult, eager to get away from a society that condemns her differences, particularly her parenting skills, and leaves her feeling unwanted. Valentina departs from Foxlowe towards the middle of the novel, leaving her son Toby behind. A short while after, Green, the narrator and protagonist also leaves. While both are trying to adapt to the outside world, they coincidentally come across one another, and as they talk about their past in Foxlowe, Valentina tells Green about a particular traumatic incident involving Toby, that urged her to join Foxlowe.

Valentina describes a day when she was out with Toby, prior to admitting herself and her son into the cult; her outing with her son being an unusual occurrence as she generally had the tendency to leave him to her mother for care. Valentina recalls taking him to Hampton Court Palace for the day and explains that due to a lack of sufficient funds they were not able to enter the palace, but instead sat outside and ate ice-cream. She then goes on to describe that the day produced the only photo of them together, him clinging to one of the lion figures outside, while she stood with her hands over her eyes, keeping out the sun. They eventually decide to leave and walk to the nearest train station, Hampton Court Station. Toby is so exhausted that he is restless and keeps running into the passengers on the train. Valentina who is exhausted herself cannot keep him under control. While he 'leap[s] like a frog and f[alls] on his knees,'²⁶⁴ Valentina just looks out of the window and leaves him to it. People stare as Toby jumps around, and Valentina, who is ashamed by these glares and feels guilty at being unable to look after her son, justifies her seeming obliviousness to her son's actions by telling herself that they, the staring strangers, should be the ones who should be taking care of him, since, through the act of staring they have come to an awareness that Valentina is not able to do so herself. She feels no concern even when a stranger on the train sweeps her son up and yells in his ear making him laugh. Valentina thinks that the man resembles one of her ex-boyfriends, and recalling her time

²⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 228.

with him, she smiles and carries on looking out of the window. The man asks Toby where his mother is, and Valentina, hearing this question, wishes that Toby does not point at her. When the man gets off at one of the stations Toby attempts to run after him, but Valentina pulls him towards her, the whole carriage watching, one of the passengers calls her a ‘stupid, idiotic, irresponsible woman.’²⁶⁵ When they finally arrive home, Valentina asks her mother whether she can leave him there so that she can go back to her own home by herself, and her mother responds by stating that she ‘couldn’t, not all the time.’²⁶⁶ Hearing this response from her mother, she takes her son to the Midlands ‘because this girl at [her] college had told [her] about a girl she knew who’d heard of Foxlowe.’²⁶⁷ When the girl mentions that Foxlowe was a commune, Valentina tells Green that all she thought of at that moment was that childcare at those places was shared. ‘I thought, I’ll take him,’ she says, ‘and he’ll attach to someone else, and then I’ll just leave him there.’²⁶⁸

Valentina is dissatisfied with her life. She seems unhappy in the way that she is parenting her son, while also showing contempt towards society for constantly judging her parenting. This, in turn, causes her to build a wall between herself and society that is reflected in her lack of desire to listen to the comments directed at her and take action accordingly. Even though she is not entirely oblivious to what is being said, she still finds herself unable to conform, due to a lack of connection between herself and the norms of the society she lives in. It is this feeling of alienation that causes her to search for an alternative way of living, one that is most suited to her own mindset or one that can accept her as she is. Most importantly, she yearns to be a part of a belief system that is completely different than the one in which she is unhappy in. In the following quote Michael Horace Barnes explains the way in which an individual’s dissatisfaction with society can lead to a strong desire to discover an alternative belief system that suits their lifestyle and ideology and provides them with a sense of belonging.

Those who join cults may do so because they find their own society, family and culture unsatisfying. They may feel so little at home that only a radically

²⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 230.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 231.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

different perspective appeals to them. But sociologists find that the main reason people join cults is for social involvement.²⁶⁹

The verbal attacks that Valentina experiences on the train by the passengers induces her detachment from society and distances her from any positive constructive social interaction. Valentina's involvement in Foxlowe, therefore, comes from her desire to belong, as the lack of healthy human interaction causes her to feel lonely, confused, and somewhat traumatised. Based on her friend's comments that Foxlowe will provide her with a loving home, somewhere that can embrace herself and her son, someplace where she can finally get some social involvement, Valentina joins the cult without any second thoughts.

Using Caruth's definition that trauma 'consists solely in the structure of its experience or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it,'²⁷⁰ we could say that Valentina treats Toby as if he is her trauma; experienced in the past but revealing itself over and over again in the present, forcing a new identity onto her, one that she cannot make herself accept since she was so young (only 15) when she gave birth to him. She feels as though if she had someone that she could speak to about her past, hence somewhere that could accept both her and her son as they are, her trauma will be resolved, because she would eventually be able to abandon him the cult while she leaves, thus dropping her trauma. Ann Kaplan claims that 'telling stories about trauma, even though the story can never actually repeat or represent what happened, may partly achieve a certain "working through" for the victim.'²⁷¹ Hence, being physically a part of a collective within the cult with whom she could share her trauma with would, in Valentina's opinion, (demonstrated through her eagerness to join Foxlowe because of her assumption that childcare would be shared) aid her in moving forward, because as High and Baker state in regards to the communal nature of cults, 'pain and suffering need not be pathologized as an individual problem.'²⁷²

²⁶⁹ Barnes, Michael Horace, *In the Presence of Mystery: An Introduction to the Story of Human Religiousness* (Connecticut: Twenty-third Publications, 2003), p. 125.

²⁷⁰ Ganteau and Onega, p. 203.

²⁷¹ Kaplan, p. 37.

²⁷² Baker and High, p. 13.

Another Foxlowe member, whose traumatic story we learn of is Kai. Kai enters the cult about half way through the novel, and immediately captures the attention of the children of Foxlowe who are eager to learn about the outside world which they have no recollection of. At one point Green asks him directly to ‘tell us about the outside?’²⁷³, a question which he chooses to ignore. Not long after we get an understanding that Kai is the storyteller in the cult, telling the children a new story every day, ‘like Alice falling down the hole, wardrobes with witches him them’, says Green, ‘he acted out tales for us and made his voice shrink and swell for the arts.’²⁷⁴ Having never heard so many stories before, Green asks him ‘how he knew so many stories’ to which Kai replies that he had heard them from his parents. ‘I told them [the stories] again,’ says Kai, ‘when it was my turn.’²⁷⁵ After uttering these words about his past, Green realises that he seemed sad, and queries him on his feelings about the outside. ‘Do you miss it, outside?’ she asks him. ‘Not the bad parts,’²⁷⁶ he responds.

Kai’s comment on how the children are lucky to be staying at a place like Foxlowe (‘What you have here, children, is magic’ he says. ‘Hardly anyone in the world has the chance you have to grow up this way.’²⁷⁷), and his statement that he did in fact miss the outside, but not the bad parts, gives an indication that his self-admittance into Foxlowe is associated with his dissatisfaction and disillusionment with the outside world, and possibly even that he had experienced some negative traumatising events.

Kai is eager to emphasize his desire to stay at Foxlowe several times throughout the novel. ‘I’d really like to stay’, he says, ‘I feel better here.’²⁷⁸ Even when he falls seriously ill, and according to Libby (another member of the house) seems to be in desperate need of a doctor, he continues highlighting his want to be a part of the house. ‘Can I say, please can I stay?’²⁷⁹ he wheezes. Freya assures him that he can, and that they will be ‘getting [him] out to the Stones tomorrow’²⁸⁰—the area that separates Foxlowe from the outer world, where one must run to if caught by the Bad, because ‘[e]ven in the winter the Stones hum with a thousand ancient

²⁷³ Wasserberg, p. 75.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

blessings,²⁸¹ which according to Foxlowe belief will heal the one infested by the Bad by driving it away. Not wanting to return to the outer world, Kai assures Freya that he ‘won’t be any trouble.’²⁸² ‘I won’t be any trouble,’²⁸³ he repeats again a few lines later, when Libby states that soon, if not taken to a doctor, he would lose all his ability to take care of himself, and he will need to be washed and changed with assistance. ‘It’s my home here now,’²⁸⁴ he responds. After walking to the Standing Stones on Summer Solstice with Freya, Kai enters the house a different man. ‘[He] came into the ballroom on Freya’s arm, but then he let go and walked in alone. His breaths came deep and almost silent. I realised I hadn’t heard the coughing the night before,’ states Green, expressing her observations of Kia’s transformation. ‘Kai is healed,’²⁸⁵ says Freya, as they walk into the ballroom together. And, when asked how he feels he says, ‘[m]uch, much better.’²⁸⁶

Although we never learn of why exactly Kai shows a strong desire to stay at Foxlowe, it is obvious that he is scared of being on the outside, potentially because of the bad experiences he endured there which has prompted his search for an alternative way of living that could heal his trauma. As is in the case with Valentina, Kai portrays an unhappiness with his previous life in the outside world, and wants to distance himself as much as possible. As discussed in *The Girls* section, Eternity too finds security only in the cult, as she never feels that she belongs in the care home which can be representative of the outside world or at least a heavily mediated version of the outside world. ‘Because when she looked at Leora she knew that she did not belong here. She wasn’t as insane as Leora was. Leora’s insanity was screaming to be let out. [...]. Eternity wasn’t like that,’²⁸⁷ I write in *The Grieving Mothers*. Feeling as though she belongs nowhere but the cult, much like Kai, she pleads to be taken back after escaping the care home, ‘[c]an I at least stay for the night?’²⁸⁸ she begs to Hannah when she is informed that she has no place in the House anymore.

As Frederik Behrle states, ‘[t]he [individual—the cult member] is dissatisfied and fed up with who he is. He wishes to abandon his old self and becomes willing to sacrifice himself

²⁸¹ Ibid., p. 27.

²⁸² Ibid., p. 97.

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

²⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 115.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 116.

²⁸⁷ Dengtash., p. 162.

²⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 192.

and blend into a greater collective movement.’²⁸⁹ This abandoning of the previous self that reminds one of the one’s past traumatic experiences and the owning of the self-imposed one in the collective movement that offers the individual an alternative better lifestyle can be seen in Foxlowe, through Kai’s acceptance of a new name within the house. ‘On his first day we didn’t talk to Kai much,’ says Green. ‘He told us his old name, and we tried to forget it, in case he stayed.’²⁹⁰ By accepting his new name Kai is deserting his past life and owning the new one in Foxlowe.

Kai’s seemingly voluntary acceptance of his new name that he hopes will bring him a trauma-free new life²⁹¹ can be attributed to a method that Freya uses to make the followers of Foxlowe become emotionally dependent on the cult, namely the breaking down of the ego. By destroying the ego or the self, Freya takes control of the emotions of her followers, often using their traumas or fears to do so. The adopting of a new name suggests a loss of original identity once one joins the cult, an abandoning and subsequent forgetting of the previous life one has had. As the cult’s aim is to remove their followers from the trauma-infused outer world or the ‘Bad’ and relocate them into a safe peaceful one, providing them with a new name is the cult authority’s way of giving them a new identity, to distance the followers from a part of themselves that could be associated with their past lives in the outer world, in the ‘Bad.’ The converted is expected to take this new life seriously by going as far as adopting a new name, just as is the case in *The Grieving Mothers* as discussed in the *After Me Comes The Flood* section. This is done to show the leader that the new alternative life of the cult is being fully owned,²⁹² and that the corrupt outer world is rejected in its entirety.

Another method that Freya uses to break down the ego and make the follower dependent on her cult is her continuous assertion about how Foxlowe represents ‘a new better kind of education,’²⁹³ immediately separating them from the world that lies outside the confines of the house. The members of Foxlowe are persuaded by Freya to believe that the outside is filled with what she calls the ‘Bad’; something that lurks in the outer world, something that does not

²⁸⁹ Behre, Frederik, *Cults and Abusive Religion*, (New York: Nova Science, 2011), p. 64.

²⁹⁰ Wasserberg, p. 69.

²⁹¹ ‘At Foxlowe everyone has two names,’ says Green, describing the naming ritual within the cult. ‘One is a secret, meant to be lost. For most, it worked like this: first, they had the one they came to Foxlowe with peeled away like sunburnt skin. Then a new name, for a new life.’ [Wasserberg, p. vii]

²⁹² Weller, Paul Robert, *Resistance, Chaos and Control in China: Taiping Rebels, Taiwanese Ghosts and Tiananmen* (Macmillan, 1994), p. 81.

²⁹³ Wasserberg, p. 49.

agree with the harmony and bliss that is prevalent in their own environment which they live within. The members, who have had no (or limited) contact with the outside world, are told repeatedly that if they are to leave the boundaries of the house they will be exposed to the ‘Bad’ that ‘can force a helpless one to do anything. Imagine the worst you can. Outside, people will twist knives into flesh, pull off one another’s skin. Eat each other.’²⁹⁴ This is similar to the way in which Betty warns Eternity to stay away from the outside world as it will bring nothing but harm, giving the homeless guy who pulled out big chunks of hair from Serena’s head as an example to prove her point (the homeless guy representing the whole of the outside world). “‘We’ve even been attacked by a homeless man. He grabbed Serena by the hair once. We tried to save her, and when we pulled, big chunks of her hair came out and they haven’t grown since,’”²⁹⁵ says Betty to Eternity who asks her what kind of harm can come from the outside.

Kenneth Boa writes how The Children of God cult or the Moon communes imposed onto the children in the cult the ‘security of a perpetual childhood,’²⁹⁶ by strictly isolating them from the world outside and convincing them that their own small worlds was what could protect them from the potential dangers of ‘normal’ society. By vilifying the ‘Bad’, hence the outer world, Freya is also creating a little hiding place for the children of Foxlowe, aiming to protect them from the perils of the outside world. In their own world traumatic events such as war, violence, and death do not exist. In their own tiny commune, as William Sims Bainbridge writes about several other cults, they shared a message of ‘salvation, apocalypticism, and spiritual “revolution and happiness”’,²⁹⁷ theories and emotional states that Freya views as being prevalent only in their own worlds. Unlike the ‘Bad’/outside world, their little world is everything positive.

Foxlowe, in common with other religious cults, including *The Grieving Mothers*, portrays the tendency of labelling the outer world with a single sinister term, in this case ‘Bad’ (in *The Grieving Mothers*’ case ‘the outer world’), to entirely separate this world from themselves, viewing it as the other. Quoting Terry C. Muck, Harold A. Netland and Gerald R. McDermott, if ‘cults were powerful, spiritual, committed to a single high cause, and good, the

²⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 25.

²⁹⁵ Dengtash., p. 27.

²⁹⁶ Boa, Kenneth, *Cults, World Religions, and the Occult: What They Teach, How to Responds to Them* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2012), p.220.

²⁹⁷ Bainbridge, William Sims, *Dynamic Secularization: Information Technology and the Tension Between Religion and Science* (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2017), p. 95.

other, hence the outer world, was weak, worldly, and uncommitted at best, and unwilling agents of the Evil One at worst.²⁹⁸ As 'The Family' in *Foxlowe* coin the outer world as the 'Bad', The Children of God label it 'The System,'; 'the political, educational, social and religious institutions of modern society,'²⁹⁹ that causes capitalism, greed and in return [gives] rise to wars and trauma.³⁰⁰

This blatant vilifying leads to dissociation from the outer world, either by reawakening the feelings of pain and misery in the members caused by the past traumatic experiences endured in the outside or inducing fear in the followers who have never lived anywhere but Foxlowe about the high potential of experiencing traumatic events if one was to leave. To forbid any contact with the outside world, organized belief systems, such as cults, seek to paint a 'negative' portrait of the outer world. As Andrew J. Pavlos writes, cult's desire to separate themselves from the outer world because they believe that the outer world follows a different path to what they are setting out to achieve; hence, as Pavlos continues, while the outside world is 'evil, sin[ful] and corrupt'³⁰¹ their aim is to pull themselves out of this trauma-inducing environment and settle into an 'external community of bliss.'³⁰² This is an idea that is strongly prevalent in Green's following speech:

we were close to the ancient way of living and the ancient landscape. We knew the moors, and the standing stones. We celebrated the solstice in the correct way, with honey and fruit and garlands of fresh flowers. We knew the Bad and we knew how to keep it away. And we had Foxlowe, where we were free. There really was no reason for anyone to want to leave.³⁰³

For the children of Foxlowe who have either never lived on the outside or were too small to remember Freya is the only person who can provide them with information about the outside

²⁹⁸ McDermott, Gerald R., Terry C. Muck, Harold A. Netland, *Handbook of Religion: A Christian Engagement with Traditions, Teaching, and Practices* (Michigan: Baker Academic, 2014), Chapter: The Family International: Theological Exchanges, Current Issues, paragraph 1. Ebook.

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

³⁰⁰ E. Van Zandt, p. 5.

³⁰¹ Pavlos, Andrew J., *The Cult Experience* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1982), p. 104.

³⁰² Ibid.

³⁰³ Wasserberg, Blurb.

world which they are so curious about. Freya takes extra caution to filter the information that she gives to her followers about the outside world, restricting certain ideas and opinions about this world, as is expected in real cults too. As David Brian Davis states, cults create an ‘unlimited allegiance as a condition of membership.’³⁰⁴ By delivering selective information about the world beyond the confines of Foxlowe, these generally being the negative aspects of the outside, hence things that can bring trauma and act as a danger to one’s life, Freya is aiming to portray her cult as superior in every sense, especially in the areas of safety, love, and togetherness. For instance, at one point in the novel Freya randomly mentions the hard sweets that she loved on the outside before she founded Foxlowe. She describes them as being ‘in rows from the oven or from chilling in the goat shed ready to cut into brittle pieces and suck.’³⁰⁵ Then Freya says, ‘Imagine it’ as if encouraging Green to think about the outside world before taking this feeling away from her by getting her to play ‘All The Ways Home is Better’³⁰⁶, a list created by Freya to indoctrinate her follower’s into believing that life in Foxlowe when compared to a life in the outside, is a utopian one, thus once more attempting to separate herself and her followers from the trauma-inducing ‘Bad’. The ‘All the Ways Home is Better’ list comprises of the following clauses:

1. We are FREE
2. We are a NEW BETTER KIND OF FAMILY
3. We have a NEW BETTER KIND OF EDUCATION
4. We are CONNECTED to the ANCIENT WAY OF LIVING and to the ANCIENT LANDSCAPE
5. We are SAFER because we know THE BAD and call it by name.³⁰⁷

By forcing her followers to repeat these clauses, a few times throughout the day, Freya is attempting to ‘fire up hostility and aggression against the outside world,’³⁰⁸ and to justify her desire to isolate them from the outside world which through its corruption could potentially

³⁰⁴ Davis, David Brian, *The Fear of Conspiracy: Images of Un-American Subversion from the Revolution to the Present* (London: Cornell University Press, 1979), p. 14.

³⁰⁵ Wasserberg, p. 9.

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

³⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 49.

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

cause trauma. Michael Barkun writes about how cults view themselves in relation to the outside world; they believe that ‘they constitute the redeemed society in miniature, combine to produce a complex system of behavioural rules.’³⁰⁹ Similar doctrines can be read in *The Grieving Mothers*, through the following clauses:

1. We are together and together we are stronger
2. We are together and together we are stronger
3. We are together and together we are better
4. We are together and together we share our grief
5. We are together and we are the only ones living life the right way.³¹⁰

Sharing a similar feel, in terms of creating an ‘Us vs Them’ mentality, with the doctrines of Foxlowe, *The Grieving Mothers* is everything that the outside is not. It is stronger and better, it provides the women a platform to share their grief and teaches them the right way of living, whereas the outside has weakened them physically and emotionally by taking their children away and has failed to understand their grief. By repeating the words ‘better’, ‘safer’, ‘free’ and ‘stronger’ in their clauses, the cults, as Barkun states in regard to cults in general, are viewing themselves as the creators of a vindicated small society, that is devoid of all the corruption and trauma of the outside world.

Emmanuel K. Twesigye elaborates on Barkun’s statement and claims that ‘[t]he new religious movements and cult leader’s activities were designed to isolate the members of the movement and cults from the supposedly corrupting outside world and its supposed evil cultures, and society with its corrupting influences and temptations.’³¹¹ By fully segregating themselves and their followers from the outside world and by exercising a strict selective system on the kind of information brought into the cult about the outside, cult leaders established a dependent environment, making it easier for themselves to take control of the thoughts of their

³⁰⁹ Barkun, Michael, *Disaster and the Millennium* (Syracuse University Press, 1986), p. 117.

³¹⁰ Dengtash, p. 58-59.

³¹¹ Twesigye, Emmanuel K., *Religion, Politics and Cults in East Africa: God’s Warriors and Mary’s Saints* (New York: Peter Lang Inc., International Academic Publishers, 2011), p. 14.

isolated followers. Distanced from the outside world the follower is unable to listen to other theories, apart from the ones that are fed to them by the leader.

The careful selection of information is not the only method that Freya uses to induce a sense of heightened fear of the outside in her followers. Another method is the Spike Walk—a form of punishment (the members of the house are subjected to if they betray the principles of the house) which requires walking through a path of pins that pick at your skin, letting blood out, causing a flaming feeling which Freya tells them is the ‘Bad’ burning away.³¹²

At one point in the novel, Blue, the youngest member of the house, escapes the barbed wire that separates Foxlowe from the outside, and is caught speaking to a man and a woman, which leaves her subject to the Spike Walk. ‘[P]ain, you see, it’s important, to drive the Bad out,’³¹³ Freya assures Blue after the Spike Walk when her arms are covered in brutal cuts seeping with blood. By forcing the ‘betrayers’ to walk through the Spike Walk, Freya is in a way aiming to show them the pain that would come from the outside world if they ever attempted to leave. The physical pain caused by the Spike Walk mirrors the physical trauma that should be expected in the outside world. Hence, Freya uses the physical act of trauma inflicted by the Spike Walk as a deterrent, with the hope that the punishment would allow those enduring it to associate the pain and trauma of the Walk with the pain and trauma they would feel if they were to enter the ‘Bad.’

Freya fulfils her desire of deeming her follower’s dependent on her cult by using such ego and identity destroying tactics to condemn the outside and justify her own organisation as utopian in comparison, as Green repeatedly emphasises that Foxlowe is her home and that she could not envision being anywhere else. ‘We live *here*,’ she says, ‘This is home.’³¹⁴ Candy Gwen Lopitz describes how these brainwashing methods used by cult leaders work in instilling the follower with a terror of everything that is not associated directly with the cult itself. ‘Such mind-control strategies are extremely effective since they amplify the subjects fears to unimaginable heights,’³¹⁵ Lopitz claims.

³¹² Wasserberg, p. 4.

³¹³ Ibid., p. 301.

³¹⁴ Ibid., p. 119.

³¹⁵ Lopitz, p. 214.

As is the case with Evie's narration in *The Girls*, *Foxlowe* also follows a first-person narration. Told from a first person point of view, *Foxlowe* reads like a life-story and autobiography, as Green tells her story from past to present (the story is told from the perspective of Green as an adult) and we, the readers, bear witness to the events that have left a mark on her and have shaped her adult life away from Foxlowe. Elaborating on Amos Goldberg's quote who states that '[the] fundamental principle of life-story and autobiography studies is that only through language can people give meaning to the events of their lives and constitute their identities, that is, by weaving those events into a narrative,' I can say that Green's narration in *Foxlowe* portrays her attempt at making meaning out of her experiences and coming to an understanding of how they have moulded her identity. Right from the prologue of the novel Green says that:

I am meant to tell Blue's story, but it doesn't flow as it should: there are broken and jagged edges to it, and some pieces are too sharp for the tongue to tell. I could begin with Blue's naming, the first little thing I did to love and to hurt Blue all at once. Or I could tell the moment Foxlowe began crumbling around us, with the front doorbell ringing. But wherever I begin, it all leads to the same place. To the sweet rotting smells, and the warm slick of blood.³¹⁶

Through this quote we understand that the story she is trying to tell is traumatic in essence, blemished with 'the sweet rotting smells, and the warm slick of blood,' hence why she is unable to tell the story in its entirety but 'there are broken and jagged edges to it, and some pieces are too sharp for the tongue to tell.' Nevertheless, she still desires to give it a try, to at least tell the parts that she finds the courage to verbalise; 'Blue's naming, the first little thing I did to love and to hurt Blue all at once.'

Green's persistence to tell her story, despite its potential trauma-inducing effect on her, stems from her desire to verify her existence through the act of storytelling, because so much of her current presence (her physical and psychological state as an adult) depends on the events she experienced in the cult, events so horrendous and traumatising that she is only able to

³¹⁶ Wasserberg, p. viii.

process them through the act of telling. Much like in Evie's case in *The Girls*, *Foxlowe* can be viewed as Green's diary; vital in aiding those who have experienced traumatic events verbalise the events that have left a significant mark on their lives. As David Kinchin writes; '[t]he purpose of writing things down is to make them real. Writing about trauma is therapeutic in itself.'³¹⁷ Sheri Oz and Sarah-Jane Ogiers also emphasise the importance of writing and storytelling in overcoming or coping with trauma. Ogiers, a childhood sexual trauma survivor, recites the impact writing and storytelling had on her journey of attempting to cope with trauma.

When I went into therapy with Sheri [Ogier's practitioner] and quickly found myself entangled in painful memories my diary/essay writing habit became, just as quickly, my most crucial self-therapy tool. The feelings of sadness, terror, and rage were sometimes so huge and dark that they would cut the breath out of my mouth and leave me staring up at them, amazed that for so many years they could have fit so compactly inside me without ripping me apart. Writing about them named them, made them less nightmarish and bizarre, and more like what they were, a natural response to a desolate childhood.³¹⁸

By telling her own story, Green like Ogiers, is trying to make sense of the feelings of 'sadness, terror, and rage' (and perhaps in Green's case guilt); prominent emotions that have prevented her from moving on after *Foxlowe* closes down immediately after Social Services visits the house and Blue reveals the cruelties that the children are subjected to. Through the act of storytelling she is somewhat able to calm the feelings of guilt she is forced to live with; the guilt of having betrayed Blue by revealing how she and Toby had taken her out to the salt line on the Winter Solstice when she first came to the house and infected her with the Bad. After Blue informs the Social Services people of the terrible things that the children are open to in *Foxlowe* Green tells Freya that:

³¹⁷ Kinchin, David, *Post Traumatic Stress Disorder: The Invisible Injury* (Oxfordshire: Success Unlimited, 2004), p.121.

³¹⁸ Oz, Sheri, Sarah-Jane Ogiers, *Overcoming Childhood Sexual Trauma: A Guide to Breaking Through the Wall of Fear for Practitioners and Survivors* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 176.

‘She’s had the Bad from the beginning. It was mine and Toby’s fault, but she’s been infected all along [...] [s]he was outside the salt line, and the Bad got in and took her, and it’s been there ever since.’³¹⁹

Blue is subjected to a form of punishment after Green utters these words, and then she disappears from the novel for a while and it takes Green a long time to tell us what happened to Blue that caused a major disruption to her life. Green describes Blue’s situation with the following words:

She was curled at the very edge of the bed like she’d had to share, as before, with Freya and me. She’d kicked off all the layers we’d put her in, to try to sweat the Bad out, and she was naked, her skin pale and bright in the good, Solstice light. [...] Her leg had gone off, like meat left in the sun. [...] I saw how deep the cuts were, the shine of the burns. Around the wounds from the Spike Walk nail, red flared out under the skin, ran in lines down to her ankles and up to her thighs. [...] The black eye Freya had given her, that first night I told her the truth, had gone down, leaving a smudge there, as though she’d just gently stroked her face with fingers covered in charcoal. All the burn and click fever was gone; she was cold [...]. We buried our fingers in Blue’s hair, spoke to her, told her to wake, begged her to, for an endless time. –It’s Solstice, we said. –The double sunset has driven the Bad out, now come back, come back, come back. Freya rocked back on her heels, then stood. –We were too late, she said.³²⁰

Here, just eight pages before the novel ends, Green finally tells us of the horrendous event that Blue had to endure. By reciting Blue’s story Green relieves herself from the guilt that she feels at causing Blue’s demise by telling Freya what she did. A couple of pages later, Green tells us directly, that reciting her story as if it were a memoir or a diary has helped her to find closure, and allowed her to somewhat soothe the trauma that has affected the whole of her adult life.

³¹⁹ Wasserberg, p. 286.

³²⁰ Ibid., p. 301-302.

‘Stories are everything,’ says Green, ‘It’s how we know about the Bad. It is everywhere on the outside, so you’re soaked in it. [...] This is a story for Blue,’³²¹ she says on the last page of the novel and she laces her fingers with the young girl who is visiting Foxlowe that has now been turned into a museum. Through the girl’s fingers she feels Freya’s fingers take hold of her instead, ‘her [Freya’s] voice finds [her] tongue and makes it her own,’³²² then she starts telling Blue’s story. Similar to the way in which storytelling is vital in helping Green gain closure, as discussed above in the *After Me Comes The Flood* section for Eternity writing is what provides her with the ability to make sense of her situation. Eternity’s writing is her way of telling her story. ‘I’ve learnt of death. It’s inhaling the darkness until you are completely gone. I know danger, the need to run away the fastest you can from something you’re not sure of. I know that the colour of red is bad,’³²³ she writes. In essence Eternity’s writing is a form of storytelling as she documents the things that she sees around her so that she can refer back to them when her memory loss becomes too scary for her. For both characters, writing helps them contextualise, and in a way simplify, what may seem daunting to them. As Ogiers states, ‘[w]riting about them [the things that cause too much pain] named them, made them less nightmarish and bizarre.’³²⁴

In this chapter, using Wasserberg’s *Foxlowe*, along with my own novel, *The Grieving Mothers*, I discussed how cults establish their doctrines by focusing on the needs and desires of their members who admit themselves into their organisation to either rid themselves of their trauma or learn how to cope with it. I analysed both novels comparatively, exploring the different approaches used by myself and Wasserberg to create a plot very much based around trauma. In this section I also argue that it is the promises cults provide their followers to cure their trauma, or at the very least make it tolerable, that binds the members to the organisations, once more proving that trauma is a vital factor in the flourishing of cults.

³²¹ Ibid., p. 309.

³²² Ibid.

³²³ Dengtash., p. 14.

³²⁴ Oz, Sheri, Sarah-Jane Ogiers., p. 176.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has studied the ways trauma influences the emergence and flourishing of cults, by placing individuals in an emotionally and psychologically vulnerable state, making them more prone to be convinced by the doctrines of cults that promise peace and order. I have analysed how trauma is portrayed in the contemporary novels, *Foxlowe*, *The Girls*, and *After Me Comes The Flood* and in my own novel, *The Grieving Mothers*. By studying *The Girls*, a novel set in a fictional cult based on The Manson Family, I demonstrated how there is a porous border between the fictional and non-fictional status of cult doctrines that are based around trauma (and a promise to cure the trauma). *Foxlowe* and *After Me Comes The Flood*, both set in entirely fabricated cults or a cult-like institutions (in terms of structure) demonstrate how trauma in cults is unchanging, regardless of whether it is a fictional cult or a real one. Each separate section included a comparative study where I analysed the differences and similarities in my own novel with that of the ones chosen for each case study, discussing how we all used literary approaches, plot and character developments, to create a story that uses trauma as its driving theme and demonstrates how cults thrive on the traumas of their followers.

While the relationship between trauma, cults, and literature have been established throughout the thesis its further implications merit study in both literary and sociological contexts. Sociological studies conducted on the nature of trauma and its influence on actual cults or the influence of trauma on other literary genres and its instigation of narrative are beyond this text's remit but are areas that require further study. This study focuses on combining a psychological theory with a literary subject (the importance of trauma in novels set in cults) that had been left unapproached up until this point. By completing this research, I was able to show the undeniable connection between trauma and novels set in cults, the latter unable to exist without the former. As discussed in the section on *The Girls*, this may not only be a reflection of reality (as trauma is irrefutably at the heart of The Manson Family) but also serves as an example of trauma as a theme that is a narrative necessity for these types of novels.

In regards to engaging in creative work and creating my own fictional cult world, I can say that we might argue that the creation of any fictional world is an exercise of power and judgement on the part of the author. All writers want to convince their readers to engage with their worlds, their characters and their ideas; perhaps we are all a little closer to the monstrous

figure of the cult leader than we would care to admit. As stated in an article in *The Guardian*, novels set in the world of cults are highly appealing to writers primarily because of ‘their bounded and reclusive worlds [which] nonetheless illuminate[s] the society surrounding them.’³²⁵ Inevitably, when reading a novel about a cult, we tend to think that we are entering the world of the Other, the sinister, the mystical, the corrupt. The ‘outer world’ views these secluded groups as delusional; misguided at best and probably dangerous. By writing *The Grieving Mothers* I aimed to create a world of trauma, both in the inner world and the outer. I set out to portray an inescapability from the psychologically exhausting experience of trauma. Like the real-life cults mentioned in this thesis, *The Grieving Mothers* promised harmony and understanding, a good riddance of trauma, but, like many of the real cults, it failed, because no matter how far away you run, no matter how many layers of doors you lock yourself behind, trauma is everywhere, both in the inner and outer worlds. The mistake of the cult is to offer quick and total healing; a simple solution to a complicated problem. The hard work ahead of us, then, lies not in quick fixes and instant salvation, but in the gradual, complicated virtues of compassion, patience and understanding.

³²⁵ Alex Clark, ‘The Girls by Emma Cline Review- allure of the cult’, *The Guardian*, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jun/12/the-girls-emma-cline-review>> (paragraph 1 of 8)

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