



Isabel

It was the cold mouth of the gun against my temple as I sat behind the wheel of my car that alerted me to the fact that this was indeed a hijack. I sat there breathless, shaking and shivering. My eyeballs darted left to right. My hands wrapped in black gloves, I gripped the steering wheel as tightly as I could. I tried to hold my head still while my mind raced past the situation in order to seek a way out. The mouth of the gun moved as I moved, and moved to the corner of my eye as I jerked momentarily and failed to meet the gaze of its owner. The swift tap of it against the bone behind my eyebrow was a clear indication that its owner did not want to be looked at. I looked into the mirror and gasped as I fell back into my seat, turning the ignition off, as my tormentor instructed by moving and pointing the gun. Not quite sure that it was my face I saw in the mirror, I moved my head back slightly, and hastily drew in the very puff of breath I had just exhaled. I could smell the staleness against my hollow palate as I inhaled. My breath was trapped by the gun, which inhaled it each time I opened my mouth. The mirror was blurry and I felt hot and cold each time I tried to keep my heaving mouth still. I looked piercingly everywhere for signs of movement.

The lights at the front of my house were all on. Beauty, Carmen, Jazz, and Amina were in the living room waiting for me. My hand was close enough to the hooter but my temple throbbed behind the mouth of the gun that menaced me. My fingers were stiff, clawed, curled side by side wrapped in the daintiness of black silk. Beauty had the other set of keys where the second remote was attached; she usually peered over the gate from the kitchen window to check for my car at the entrance, then opened the gate and shut it and met me at my car. I had

telephoned her earlier in the afternoon, after I spoke to Jazz, and asked her to inform the group that I would be running late and they should start without me. I chewed my lips so hard, praying that she would open my back door; that I tasted blood; it swam in my mouth with no possibility of going anywhere.

“Get out of the car,” he ordered, his voice soft and his tone harsher than his eyes, which were sheltered by a ridiculous-looking blue baseball cap. His movements were that of a well-trained cat. He kept the gun at my temple with both his hands. I looked down at his expensive-looking luminous white trainers, lined with navy blue all around the side. He moved swiftly, the padded trainers allowing the calculated silent hop and bounce, his blue windbreaker, which lay brisk against his broad shoulders, shielding him somewhat from the Cape South-easter.

“Turn the lights off and gimme the keys, lady,” he ordered as he looked over his left shoulder, touching the tip of his nose with the gun as though inhaling its power. His voice thundered in my ears; there was no evidence of Cape Town in his voice, in the order he issued. I swallowed the blood immersed in saliva in fast gulps and choked. The gagging sound forced his attention upon me and he pushed my head down and swiftly managed a chop behind my neck. I gasped out loud as the gun moved from my head to his face, my lungs still battling for air. I absorbed all of the air in the car in that instant, shivering and panting. My breaths were short and intermittent. My mouth was open and dry. I could feel the coarseness of my own breath against my quivering tongue—too dry to beg for mercy. That small space I left for the smoke to release itself from my cigarette as I puffed pleasantly while listening to the sound of *Freshly Ground* was exactly where he inserted his fisted, loaded, hand. He pointed then jerked the gun in the direction of the radio and CD player and I knew what he meant. My hands shook as I touched the knob and turned the music off. I was sniffing, crying and shaking. I looked towards the back door hoping Beauty might make an appearance but there was no sign of her.

“Shut up or I’ll blow your bloody head off, lady,” he uttered, in a cool crisp voice. I pictured the women from my writing circle at the front end of my house, in my living room, seated on the black sofa

chairs, which were usually loosely scattered in a circle, or sitting on the floor, no doubt, reading their writing for this week's session. I saw Amina's car on Cambridge Street, stacked to the brim with all sorts of fancy material, and Carmen's parked right behind hers. Beauty's car was parked at the station and so was Jazz's oversized four-by-four. They were all secured by rather expensive alarm systems; one has to be so careful these days. Jazz's brother, Manjit, usually dropped her off and waited for her to telephone him before he collected her; they must have changed their arrangement for this evening. Someone should be coming to see where I was, even though I was quite late, I thought, biting my lip and hoping, as I counted from one to one hundred, for my back door to be opened. I was too afraid to wipe my lips, although the small trickling taste of my own blood did alert me to the unfortunate realization that this was not a dream. My whole body shook and I cried out aching as he grabbed at my hair with his left hand and pulled chunks of it through the window.

"Now, take the keys. If you touch the car I will blow your head off, lady," he said, as he let go of my hair. He looked at the chunks of hair in his hand then thrust them into his pocket, smiling, after wiping his hands on his trousers—as though he wanted them to be clean for the purpose he intended for them.

I touched the keys in the ignition, and at the moment when I made contact with them I exhaled and burst out crying so loud I thought my lungs would drop onto the seat.

He put his arm through the small space of the window and took the keys from me, just like that, as if my frightened face gave him that final permission.

I tried to remember Tom's face, which I had seen moments ago in his consulting room at the hospital, his loving hands stroking my hair, as the man with the blue windbreaker pointed the gun at my flaring nostrils.

"Your cell?" he demanded. I handed it to him.

He turned my cellphone off then shoved it into the pocket of his jacket; I could hear it dropping among coins and other items there.

"At least it's over . . . he got what he was after . . . just be calm . . . just be calm," I kept saying to myself, ready to leave my car in his

hands. He shifted the peak of his cap to the back of his head.

“Don’t get out, lady, stay where you are!” he demanded, in an icy voice.

“Just take the car . . . please . . . just take the car!” I called out, my mouth too bloody to offer anything else and my eyes focused on my back door.

“Shut up!” he shouted, fury and agitation written all over his face. My eyeballs darted about, expecting a stir of some sort from one of my many nosy neighbours.

“Move!” he instructed.

The mixture of tears and nasal fluids combined on my lips as I bit and swallowed simultaneously, gasping and crying into my sweaty gloved palms, as I covered my face with them. He climbed into the seat beside me, shoving my bag of shopping from Woolworths to the floor, and shut the driver’s door quietly. He locked all of the doors in my car with the remote control attached to the keys I had handed him. He stared at me coolly, then electronically double locked my backdoor, just like that, without hesitation, as though my keys and remote belonged to him. He certainly knew enough about remote-controlled electronic gates. He pointed the gun at me, indicating that I should move to the back seat. The *Argus* and the morning’s *Cape Times* were on the back seat and he shoved them with his left foot. He must have caught a glimpse of both front pages, each of which featured the beloved deputy president Zuma who had been charged with rape, and he smirked.

“Gah!” he exclaimed, in a vulgar sort of way as the stench of his breath circled the inside of my car, then looked back towards my house where the lights were all off except for the far front corner where the writing circle met.

“He knows,” I said to myself, afraid he might hear my thoughts. Speaking to myself was like having someone with me as a witness, an alibi, someone to guide me, as I contemplated what to do next. I tried to stay focused, fearing my death at the hands of this stranger with a gun. He knew that there were four women in my house waiting for me . . . he must have been watching me. I never drove home at night unaccompanied. I hadn’t called the security watch, as I usually did, to alert them of my time of arrival, nor had I allowed Tom to drive

behind me. Tom usually followed me and waited until I was indoors or he came inside with me to check if everything was all right, except for Fridays when he was on call and Jazz and Manjit usually collected me from my office. Jazz worked in Neurosurgery, which was two blocks from mine at the hospital. Tom had asked me to stay with him to talk about the future of our relationship and I agreed, even though my Friday nights were reserved for the writing circle. I needed to talk to Tom. My mammogram was frightening. I had no idea how to proceed with treatment, should I need it. I could not tell Tom about it despite the speech I had rehearsed. My gynecologist had found several small lumps in both my breasts. I looked at them differently after those tests. I did not want Tom to drive behind me because I didn't want Beauty to know that I was dating him . . . not yet anyway. Beauty had only met Tom once at a social gathering and was very quiet; this usually means that she does not like someone. A part of me wondered whether she knew about Tom and Frank; I doubt very much whether Frank would have told her before he died.

With the gun still in his hand, the man with the blue windbreaker put the seats of the car down then put the gun inside my mouth. He simply opened my mouth and shoved the gun inside it, as though he was looking for a place to stash a nuisance item. The gun barrel faced outward. I gagged and the gun dropped to the floor. I was choking on my own saliva, and he pulled my hair, yanking my head towards him so that I would face him. My head bounced up and down. I think I might even have wet myself slightly, because my muscles gave way under me and all I could see was fury and agitation on his face, as though I was a clumsy schoolgirl who could not carry out a simple request. I could feel parts of my legs; although I knew they were there and I could see them, they felt rubbery in some places and numb in others.

"If you do that once more, lady, your life will be over," he said, pointing at me with his calloused left hand.

I shook, and my head bounced in agreement. He opened my mouth again, as wide as he could, and stretched every muscle within its range. He placed the gun inside of my mouth again, this time using his fingers to stretch the sides of it, and looked into my eyes. I could

not look into his. I could taste the fish paste from the sandwich I had had in Tom's office as his fingers slipped around my teeth. I tasted the nicotine from his fingertips as he dug, like an eager child on a sandy beach, and opened my mouth wider and wider. The gun fitted into his hand like a glove; inside of my mouth it felt like a large heavy rock, weighing me down and forcing me to sink into his hands. My whole body was coerced into compliance. My shoulders fell and my body curved into a ball to hold the gun inside my mouth. My mouth was this thing, this useless thing, which he just played with and opened and shut, as though it was an ornament. My breath competed with the gun for air as I held onto it with my lips. I watched with muted obedience as he told me where to sit. I looked down at the bridge of my nose as the barrel of the gun hung outside of mouth, incapable of sustaining its full grip.

He used both his hands to undress me after shoving my arms above my head. Four women were inside my house waiting for me, sharing their writing on the body, which was the focus of our group. Mr and Mrs Sedgewick, the neighbours across the street, were watching the eleven o'clock news on television and I could see the reflection of the screen on their front window. I waited for Mr Sedgewick to look in the direction of my yard but he was turned away from me. There was some report on the war in Iraq and I caught a glimpse of American soldiers running in and out of crumbling homes, with guns pointed in every direction. I had no idea it was that late. The man with the blue windbreaker moved my head and removed his baseball cap, in a gentlemanly fashion, then stroked his lower face, bringing his fingers to the point of his chin. Why are neighbours never nosy when you want them to be? Mr Isaacs, the neighbour across from me, two doors down, formerly an English teacher, slammed the lid onto his rubbish bin and looked about the street, and at the small garden he kept, as he usually did every evening while he watched the news halfheartedly and roamed about the house, looking for unsavoury items to collect while uttering atrocities at whomsoever offended him on the televised news broadcast.

"Bloody Zuma!" I heard him cry out, as he banged the lid back onto the rubbish bin in his yard and as my head was being thrust

further back into the leather seat of my car. I looked towards Mr Isaacs as my head bounced up and down, hoping for his eyes to venture over to my direction, as the man with the blue windbreaker held me down and lowered me into the back seat of my car. Mr Isaacs was too busy to steal a glance in the direction of my yard to see whether I had brought another load of lesbians to my house, as he regularly remarked when he was angry at me for not inviting him to our writer's circle even though I explained to him it was a women's writing group. He had started checking up on me just over a year ago when Calvin left and appeared perfectly entitled when I questioned him about it. Biscuit, the cat, which belonged to that busybody Mrs Applebaum, watched in quiet contemplation while her owner blew out the candles in the living room and bolted the security door before she retired for bed. I hoped and prayed for her alarm to go off, as it often did at eleven o'clock, because she would either forget to reset it or forget the combination, in which case she would rattle the gate on my front door and demand my assistance. I could almost see her walking around the house groping at furniture in order to get to her bedroom. "Damn that Mrs Applebaum," I thought, what's the point of having so many lamps and lit candles in her house if she can barely see? She'd asked me for names of eye doctors every week and tried to force a prescription out of me, even though I had told her I was only a social worker and not an optometrist, despite my white coat. She cornered Jazz once, but Jazz's abruptness put her off completely. I begged for her bedroom light to remain on, as the glare was still casting a light onto my car. My head was forced further back and I shut my eyes. The tears that rolled from them made small puddles on the leather seat—they, along with Biscuit the cat, perched high on the opposite wall, were my only witnesses. The only time I had previously stared at my tears forming puddles on a car seat was when my uncle Reggie had once asked me to take the bag of fishing tackle from his lap as he was driving us back from Kalk Bay harbour, then grabbed my hand and put it inside his pants. He drove with my hand between his legs, then forcibly held my hand down with his hand, the left one that had the tattoos on it, and jerked my hand up and down on his penis. I sat beside him in the front of the van too afraid to say anything, and saw my tears roll down my

cheeks and form puddles right in front of me, between my legs, on the leather car seat. Minutes later he pushed my right hand out, as he shrieked—the same right hand which minutes earlier held a delicious chocolate ice cream cone, which he had bought, having refused the payment I offered, excitedly, from the pocket money my mother had made available to me since my tenth birthday. When we arrived at his house at the top part of Steenberg, where his wife and my parents were waiting for us to join them for afternoon tea, he stopped the car a few metres away from the house, then muttered under his breath that I had to clean up, wash my hands with the water in the rubber water bottle he kept under the driver's seat.

THE WRITING CIRCLE

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