

*No Word Like Home*

Jem has packed the suitcase with clothes haphazardly, without thinking. He doesn't even know what the weather is like in Johannesburg. He stops and, propelled by a sudden urge, leaves his room and begins to walk down the corridor. At the end of the passage the door to Liz's room is closed, locked. He reaches it, takes a deep breath and turns the key. Inside the room looks exactly the same as before. The bed is neatly made, the linen white with a branch of lavender embroidered on its centre. The dressing table still holds her jewellery boxes, her make-up chest, the small glass tiger she always kept beside her mirror. The clock next to her bed displays the wrong time, but that is the only aberration from the norm. The rest is still, peaceful, pristine. Jem walks over to the bed and sits on its edge, looking at his reflection in the mirror. He remembers the day it happened. Well, it was only a few months ago. But it feels as though it was yesterday.

America had been due to leave for Massachusetts the next day, and they decided to make the same trip to San Francisco that they had made on their first date. The nervousness and excitement that he had felt then were replaced by sadness and longing. The train journey seemed endless, the slow clicking of the tracks beneath the carriage sounding like a clock counting down the seconds. The hours dragged on, the blue of the sky turning grey and then orange in slow motion. They retraced their footsteps through the city, eating their clam chowder in silence, occasionally turning to smile at each other or remark at the stillness of the sea. They arrived at the bridge when the day was drawing to a close, and the bright red of the tall metal supports had begun to melt into the sunset sky. Finding themselves in the same place halfway down the sidewalk, America rested her head on his shoulder, and they remained there for an eternity. Then it was time to catch the last train back, the terrible march towards an ending, the minutes slipping from their grasp and flowing on towards the next chapter. They said goodbye outside her house, standing on the wooden patio, embraced and promised to stay in touch. Then she went inside and closed the door without looking back.

Jem walked slowly towards home, hands in his pockets,

brooding. He was so absorbed in America's leaving that he had barely thought about anything else, was still thinking about her when he arrived home to see the crowd of people standing in the garden.

He stopped in his tracks at the end of the street, a few hundred metres from the house, trying to get a better view of what was happening. At first he assured himself that it was the neighbour's house, that it had nothing to do with him, but it became clearer as he walked closer that it was indeed theirs. Five or six people formed a semi-circle on the grass, with clumps of two or three more huddled on the street outside. Liz, he thought, starting to panic, feeling his stomach drop, fear invading him, enveloping him, starting to walk more briskly, breaking into a run, his breathing quick and shallow.

As he arrived at the house, people turned to watch him. One woman burst into tears and covered her mouth with one hand. A tall man walked over to put his arm around Jem's shoulder, saying "I'm sorry, son."

There, beyond the semi-circle of sentinel onlookers, lying spread-eagled in a bed of roses, like a limp flower, like a fallen angel, was Liz. The soil was damp with reddish blood, her white linen dress maroon in patches and covered with dirt. Her body was contorted so that her right leg lay across her left, her torso turned in the opposite direction, her face half-buried in the sand. She looked like she was stretching, preparing for a run. Her eyelids were open, and her eyes stared out glassy and unseeing. That was the worst part; her eyes, like the eyes of a fish, petrified by death, staring into the darkness. Jem felt the wind knocked out of him, stumbled a few steps backwards, saying nothing, unable to cry. He stood there for minutes, with people surrounding and consoling him, until he heard the siren of an ambulance and the screech of tires on the sidewalk. Then he blacked out.