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JUNGLE



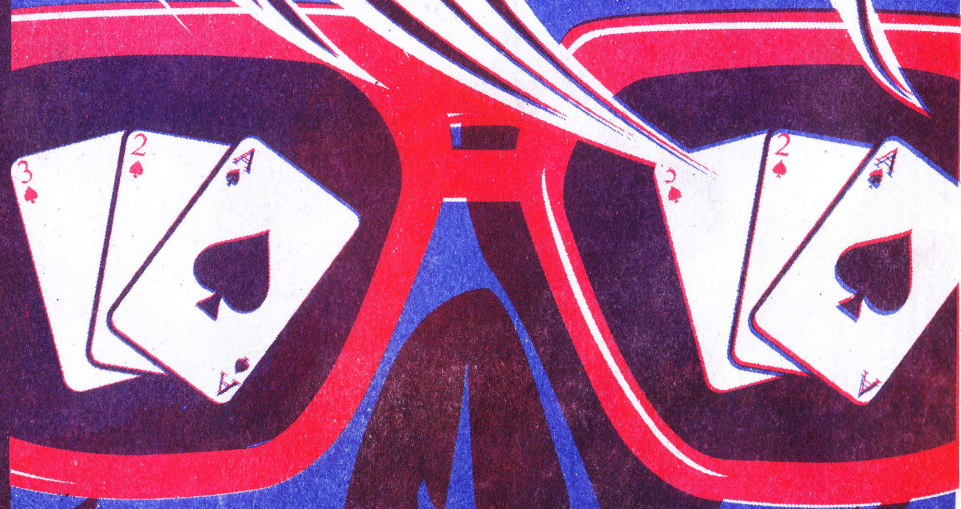
ISSUE N° 19

LOVE! DEATH!

DANGER!

MANGOS!

LOVE! DEATH!



Half an hour passed, then fifty minutes, and then it was nine o'clock. I tried to call countless times, with the same result. Ten minutes into the next hour I called a waitress so I could order and eat alone. 'Sorry ma'am,' said she. 'We stopped taking orders at nine.'

'Bastard,' I texted Anonymous and left.

*

When I went to the office the following morning, I walked into a crisis of unimaginable proportions: V.J. had been deported to India the evening before. With no handover whatsoever, management was in pandemonium. I was surprised that management summoned only me to a meeting. Everybody looked up as I entered. Around the table they smiled their greetings while nodding as I occupied what I presumed to have been V.J.'s seat, for it was the only one vacant. Mr Anand, the MD, said, after uttering good morning: 'V.J. recommended you highly that in the event of his deportation you should be the one to take over. I therefore . . .'

I trembled. VJ? Me? How? Wasn't there Jagdish between us? But nothing was explained further. We proceeded straightaway with the main business of the day, something about Forex scarcity.

That first day in my new role was a mess, and its clarity has survived in my memory over the years. As days passed, however, I gained composure, like a captain after steering the ship through a stomach-turning storm. I stamped my authority on the department and reengineered the activities to make it more effective. I put in longer hours and

sacrificed my weekends. I pushed everyone to beat the deadlines. For the first time, Jagdish found himself earning his pay. Six months later, precisely a week after our company listed on the Malawi Stock Exchange, I was confirmed in the post. Jagdish resigned in protest and returned to India. I didn't give a damn.

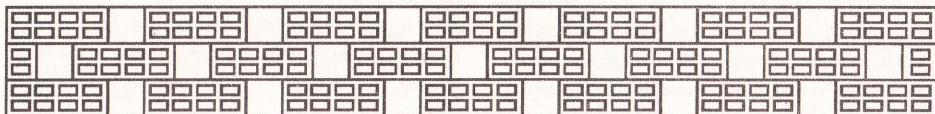
Since that doomed night Anonymous did not write again. I forgot all about the guy. I had more important things to do in my life.

On Labour Day I got an email from VJ, the first since his deportation. He greeted me from Dubai where he said he now lived. The first months after his deportation in India had been hell as he felt like a fish out of water. Luckily he got a quick response to a job application he made on the internet. He now wanted to know, for curiosity's sake, whether our company had managed to get listed on the Malawi Stock Exchange. Did I have any problems settling down? He had picked it from the grapevine that Jagdish left. He could not have guided the finance team through the rigorous listing process, wrote VJ. He hoped I had now settled in my new post. He had no iota of doubt I was going to deliver.

It was the postscript, however, that had me stare at the screen for a long time: Perhaps one day we could, finally, have that dinner of ours? If you find yourself in Dubai one of these days please let me know. We need to have dinner in a place where no immigration law can frustrate our date with an abrupt deportation order. Thank you for the memories. Hugs and kisses.

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Illustrations by Shaun Hill.



LOSERS



BY DAVID CORNWELL

Hey, stop it, he told her.

Shona uncurled herself on the bench and took her head off Greg's lap. He turned his face

toward her, his sunglasses reflecting nothing, and he said, Come on, I'm working here.

They were waiting without luggage. Just the two of us not going anywhere, Shona thought. She looked at Greg, who seemed nervous, his one hand going over and over again through his hair, then picking at the bandage on his other hand.

It was morning, and they were sitting in the taxi rank — a low, squat building that used to be an old GM warehouse, that'd been gutted and then lived in for a few months before the rank moved in. It had three walls and a concrete floor that never got cleaned. The two short walls were lined with little shops, people selling stuff to eat and stuff like airtime and toilet paper and headache pills. There was only one long wall, with some benches in front of it — the other side was open, three patches of bright light and two dark columns. When the taxis drove in, you saw the dust they brought in from the road long before you saw the taxis.

It wasn't really an official kind of place — there was no one in a uniform or anything around. Just some tough guys who stayed there all the time and the drivers, who all looked like they needed sleep and who

stood around together smoking and drinking from a two litre coke, sometimes taking money from someone or pointing them at the taxi they needed to get on.

Greg and Shona were waiting for a taxi to get in from Encobo. If all went according to plan a guy called Geelbek was going to get off it and give Greg a backpack full of pills and dope and a couple of nice guns, all stuff that'd been confiscated by police. Greg was going to take the backpack from him and then catch a bus down to PE with it: him and Shona in the bus, no plans to go anywhere specific after that.

And all of this because Greg owed the guy from PE lots of money. They'd spent six weeks and all the money they had trying to run — they were trying to get to Namibia but their car kept breaking down, then broke forever, and then they had to work for a couple of weeks here and there to buy bus tickets — and somehow the guy, a rich, mean guy who didn't sound South African had shown up at the place they were staying in Upington and shot a hole through Greg's right hand, then emptied a can of pepper spray in his eyes and then smiled and asked him, Are you tired of running now?

That was months ago. Greg just had to do this one last thing for him and then they'd be square.

For Shona, the worst thing about it

was she had no idea where the money even went. She knew what Greg was into — it was some huge scam the guy had going during the World Cup, pretending like he ran a tour company. The guy had lots of things going: game drives that got cancelled at the last second, betting, late-night taxis — Greg drove a tour bus a few times a day. All he did was drive people around PE for 45 minutes, past the stadium and then slowly along Govan Mbeki, quickly to the valley and then back to Walmer. He didn't talk to them or anything and it must've been really boring, but they all paid in the end, in cash, five hundred bucks each, and not all of them complained but if they did then there were people who Greg could call to sort it out.

But even though he was getting paid nicely just as it was, it turned out Greg was also stealing a bit off the top, and then spending it places Shona didn't know about. The whole thing was unreal to her from the start and she wasn't always sure why she stayed with him, except she knew one thing for certain: Greg was much worse when he was alone. Just after he'd told her about everything, right before they'd packed everything up and driven away, she'd made him promise that whatever happened from then on, he'd tell her about his ideas before he did anything with them himself.

Shona said, I'm so bored, Greg.

Here, he said, fetching some coins out his pocket. Go buy yourself something. Or go find someone to talk to, I don't know. I'm in this here, man, fuck. Jussus. I'm here with my balls hanging out, and you're *bored*?

Shonna got up and stretched, then went off to go look at the shops. The further she went, as she walked more and more into the light coming in from the open side of the

building, she found some things she hadn't been able to see from where they'd been sitting.

Right at the back of the place was a small room, like an office, with a door with a hole in it and the word QAPHELAI written on it in yellow paint. Near the office, in the corner where it joined with the wall, was an old man with a white beard and a guitar. In front of him on the ground he had a leather cap and a sign that said ENKOSI IINTSAPHO.

It wasn't a nice guitar, and it looked like it might've even had a broken string, but the way the guy played it made it sound more like a drum, and he held the beat so steady that you just had to listen for a couple of bars to know that that right hand wasn't ever going to let you down — and when Shona felt that, she took a few steps forward and then she could hear him singing, a church song, singing the first part low and grumbling, then doing the part where normally the whole choir sings all by himself, in a high, sweet, frail voice, a ghost sound you couldn't believe he was making.

The air started to sparkle, and then Shona heard the taxi coming along the road, then heard its brakes screech when it came in. She looked in the guy's cap and there was about two rand in there, all just brown coins. She put a five in and then went over to the other side of the building.

She saw the machine as she passed through the last patch of sunlight. From the corner, in the shade there, she saw the flashing lights and then when she got closer she heard the whistles, saw the hook dangling in the air, the joystick, the buttons, and all those eyes shining in all the colours of the lights. She looked at the money in her hand and separated out the twos. She put four rand in

the machine and it made a whooping sound that she laughed at. She screwed up her face and tried to maneuver the claw, moving it in stutters and jerks, concentrating and holding her breath until the time ran out and the claw started going down. It closed weakly as it fell, gripping at a unicorn, raising it just a bit above all the others and then dropping it. The claw went back up so fast it bumped against the top of the machine, then the whole thing groaned and all the lights went out. When they flashed back on, Shona put more coins in. This time, while she moved the claw, she kept moving herself round to the side of the machine, pushing her face up against the glass to cut out the glare, trying to imagine the shape it was going to be when it was closing, then going to back to look at it straight on and moving the joystick just tiny bits at a time. When she was sure she had it lined up properly, she took a deep breath and pushed the button. The claw went down, this time coming up with a mermaid tail in its jaws. She held her breath and put her hands on her cheeks and felt heat rush into them. The whole mermaid came out the pile, she had long blonde hair that hung down as she rose, it was almost time for the claw to come back with her — then it bumped against the roof again, and the tail wriggled free and the mermaid fell back on the pile and Shona groaned, even louder than the machine. One of her last two rands wouldn't fit in the slot. She tried the joystick anyway but the claw just hung there, shining.

She tried the coin again and it dropped on the floor, where it stuck without rolling. She didn't pick it up, she just turned and started back toward the bench.

Greg saw the dust and then he heard the taxi, and then he saw it coming in. It was a full one. For some reason, he was

sure this was going to be it. He went out on the floor, and asked a few people Encobo? Encobo? and a couple of them seemed to nod.

He stood a bit away from it and watched the people getting off. Mostly young guys wearing hats and jackets, a couple of old men, a young woman or two with a baby. Then he saw a backpack get pushed out the door, and then a guy with the weirdest face Greg'd ever seen get out behind it.

Geelbek had that thing you see sometimes, when people's skin just goes pure white in patches — except his was yellow, banana yellow, and it was just around his mouth — born that way or stained like that, Greg couldn't tell.

Are you Geelbek? Greg said.

'You Elvis?' the guy said, and he got a matchbox out his pocket and lit a stompie he had in there.

Greg was nervous but he laughed, and took off his sunglasses. His eyes began to burn right away. I'm Greg, he said, stretching out his bandaged hand.

Geelbek just took one last pull on his cigarette, then slid the backpack over to Greg. Greg tried to hoist it up with one hand, then put his sunglasses on, then lifted it properly onto his back.

When he looked up, Geelbek'd gone off and was talking to the drivers, pointing at Greg and laughing, and getting sips from the coke.

Greg went off to find Shona. His eyes were still sore and he only saw her when he got back near the bench. Look what I got, he said.

He made a crook with his elbow and he stood upright, he was proud of himself. It's a good morning, baby. Come, let's walk, he said.

Shona laughed, and weaved her

arm into his. They left the place with her bent into his side, her head on his chest, moving in the fluid morning light like one drunk swimmer, feeling the weight of the backpack shifting and sliding behind them all the time like so many hands trying to tug them back.

They followed the dirt road back and then crossed over the road that went to PE, and then they started seeing a few fences and buildings and then soon they were on the edge of town again. The wind was up and it was swirling, making little tornadoes with the leaves and stuff that was in the gutters. It was nearly ten, but it was still too cold to walk in the shade. They went back and forth across the street to keep with the sun and when they went round one corner they had to step over a homeless guy, sleeping with his hand around the neck of a wine bottle that still had a bit in it. Greg stopped and bent down to get it, but Shonna told him no.

Things got scary for Shona the further into town they walked. Where before they'd gone past fences and little concrete houses, tiny gardens with tied up dogs and washing lines, now it was bars and salons and lots of people selling stuff from stalls right on the street. People lived in some of the buildings and there was loud music and angry voices coming down from everywhere. At an intersection they saw an ambulance loading somebody up, in the middle of a big crowd of people looking desperate and furious about something. At least, Shona thought, her and Greg and the backpack weren't the biggest problem in the world: if you were police, you'd probably start somewhere else first.

On the next corner they saw a guy — the first white guy they'd seen in half

an hour — standing in front of a little table, smiling and speaking to people drifting down the street, trick-shuffling some cards.

Are you hungry? Greg asked Shonna, stopping, pulling her around in front of him, holding her hands in both of his.

I could definitely eat.

Okay, look here, Greg said, taking out his wallet. He showed what was inside. We've got two hundred and thirty bucks. This, he said — taking out two hundred-rand notes — This is bus fare.

Is that enough? Shona said.

Ag, it'll be fine. We'll make a plan. This, he said, showing her the thirty, This isn't going to get us much. I need to eat something decent.

No Greg, just don't.

What? You don't even —

No. Please, just don't.

Now come on, Shona. After today we're free again. We're loose. It's a good day, baby. Please, just let me win us some breakfast money.

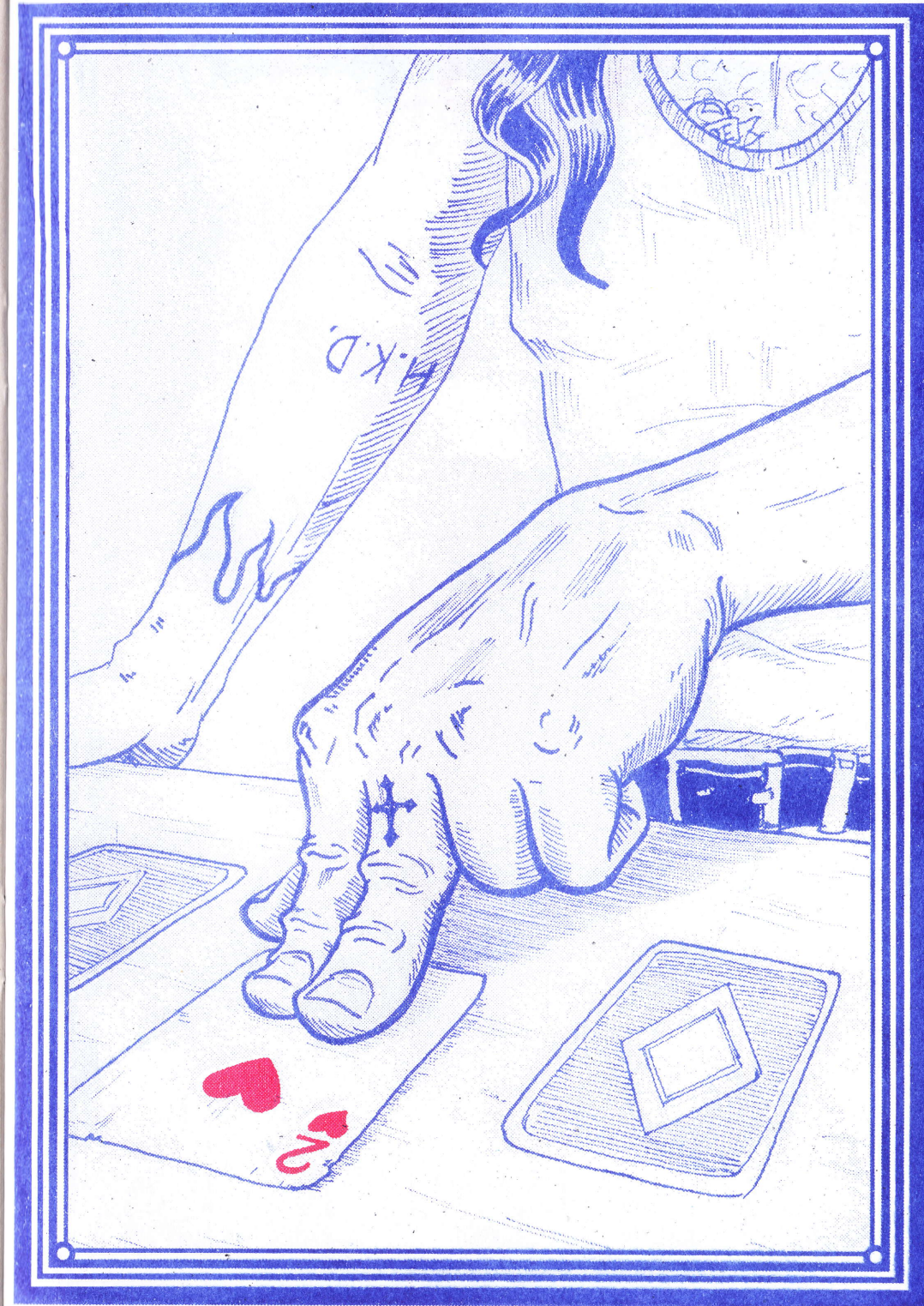
What if you lose?

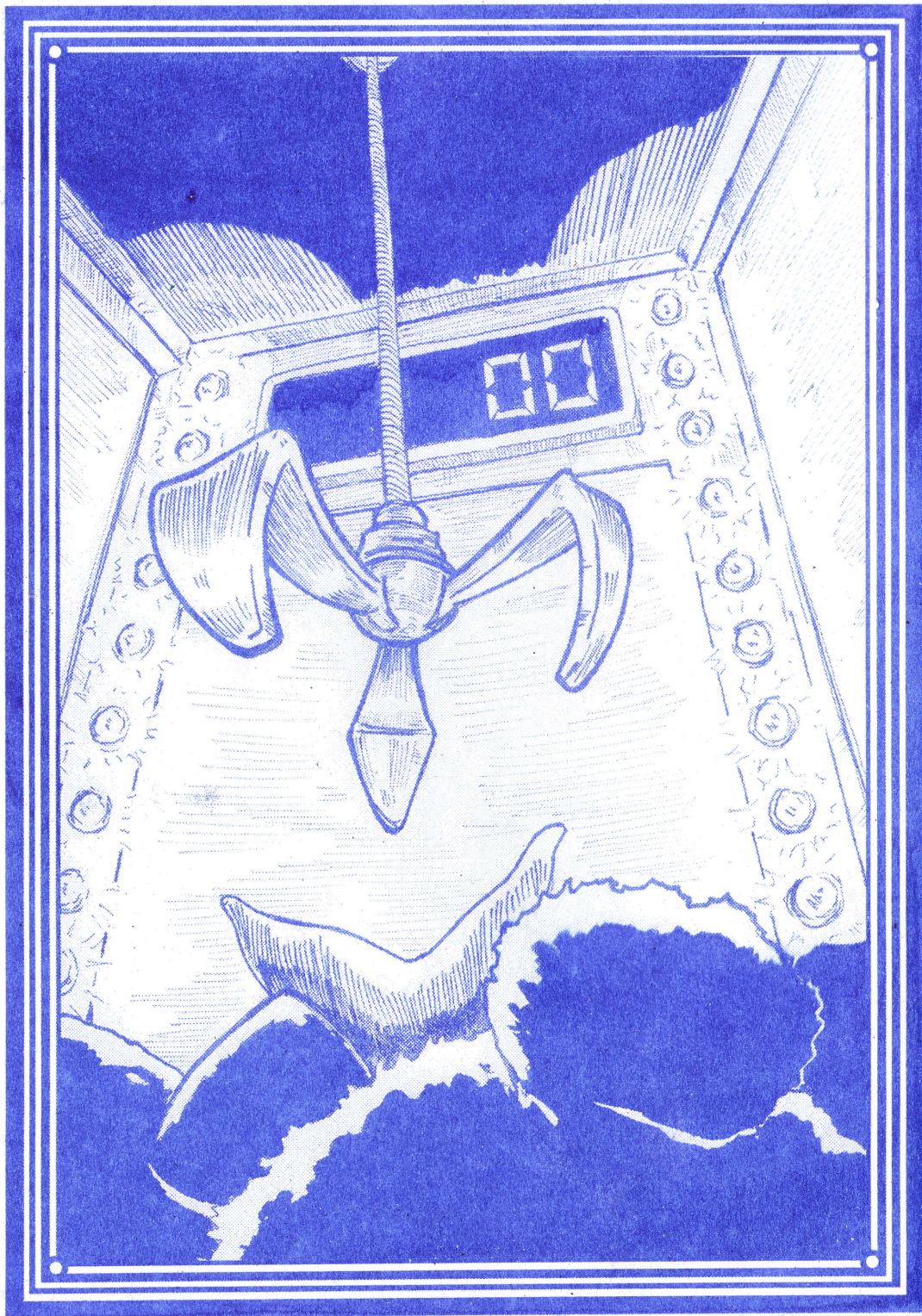
Then we head straight to PE and he can fucking buy us lunch when we get there. Have you felt how heavy this thing is? He'll be in a good mood, I'm telling you.

Shona's mouth was hard. Her mascara started to run. She looked at Greg through her tears, standing there with his hand wrapped up in that dirty bandage, his huge sunglasses shining in the pale sun. Jesus, it's not fair, she thought. Why can't you just be somebody different?

She said to him, Well Greg, I'll be standing right here.

Just shout if you see pigs, okay? he said, and started to leave, then seemed





to remember something and turned back. He kissed her on the forehead and squeezed her arm. Then he went off.

Greg walked over to the table. It was hard to tell how old the guy standing there was, and even to harder to guess what his story might've been. He had long hair and he was wearing a vest and tight jeans. His skin was so pale it showed the veins — the blood inside the veins, almost — and his arms were covered in tattoos that looked like drawings on paper.

The guy stopped shuffling and said to Greg, Howzit, what do you need?

You do monte here?

Monte? Sure. Blackjack as well. And I can get you some snort, if you're looking.

No, Greg said, taking the thirty out his wallet. I can't afford drugs and blackjack hates me.

Okay, it's three-to-one odds, and you get one guess and that's it, the guy said. He peeled some cards off the top of the deck. You just tell me where the ace is.

Greg looked at the cards in front of him: a red two, a red three, and the black ace.

You ready? the guy said, then flipped them over.

One second, Greg said. He took his sunglasses off and stared at the cards until he felt taken over by them. His eyes started to itch. He let the noises on the street commingle and die down to a dull hiss and he kept staring, till it felt like there was nothing in the world except those cards and those bony hands.

He nodded.

The cards flew around the table. Before Greg even knew it, they were still again. The middle, he thought. No, the right.

The middle, he said.

The guy turned it over. The two stared up at Greg.

Two hearts, the guy said. The house wins.

He looked into Greg's eyes, then shuffled the pack a few times and shrugged. How about some double or quits? he said, then smiled and shuffled the cards some more.

David Cornwell was born in Grahamstown in 1985. Now he lives in Woodstock. He's currently working on a novel, and most weekends he plays in a roots-rock band called Sixgun Gospel. 'Losers' is one tenth of a collection of stories called 'Yet Trouble Came'. Illustrations by Llewellyn Van Eeden.

