

Caine Prize Stories 2009:
Shortlist

Icebergs

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TOWARD THE END OF last summer, when I was combating a bout of loneliness after the death of my wife, a new neighbour moved in next door. He arrived at number 16 – I’m number 14 – late one night. I had seen the colour advertisement for the house in the property section of the *Cape Times*: panoramic views of the Atlantic; three-minute walk from the beach; twenty-minute drive from the centre of Cape Town; six bedrooms en suite; swimming pool; double garage; price on application.

The FOR SALE signs went down the same day he moved in. Although when I say ‘moved in’, I don’t mean that he was accompanied by a moving van and stream of brown boxes; he came only with his driver, who, I would later discover, was also his bodyguard. If there were any suitcases I never saw them. I was sitting on my pool deck, having a final cigarette before bed, when I heard him step out onto the balcony of what I imagined was the master bedroom. Even at such a late hour he was formally dressed in a suit and tie. His face was in shadow but I could still make out the glint of his glasses. He stood with one hand in his trouser pocket and stared into the darkness for several minutes.

There was no sound apart from the waves throwing themselves onto the rocks below us. We couldn’t have been more than 10 or 15 yards from one another, and the cool Atlantic breeze was carrying the smoke from my cigarette up toward him. He cleared his throat, and from out of the shadows around his head I heard a crisp, well-spoken voice say, “Good evening.”

“Evening,” I replied. “Welcome to Llandudno.”

“Thank you. It’s very pleasant out here.”

“You can feel that autumn’s on its way, though.”

Whatever he said in reply was lost in the pounding of the waves. After a few moments he said, “Well, good night,” and as he turned back toward the light of the curtainless bedroom I caught a brief glimpse of a slender, greying man with dark skin. He stayed for only two days and then I didn’t see him for nearly a month. While he was away several vans delivered furniture, still wrapped in plastic, and later I noticed that curtains had been fitted in the master bedroom. I had recently

retired and so had plenty of time to watch these comings and goings.

Mostly I am on my own. Three years ago my wife was taken from me in pieces: first her right breast went; then her left breast; then her will to fight; until, finally, what remained of her was wheeled away down a corridor. My two boys are in London, and my daughter still insists on living in Johannesburg, in the same house in which we were all once a family.

For many years I ran an advertising agency in Johannesburg. When I sold my shares in it my wife and I bought the house in which I now live. We were lucky because that was just before the property market erupted and I doubt that I could afford the house today. My wife did most of the interior decorating and oversaw the renovations, but toward the end she became too ill to leave Johannesburg and she never did get to live here. She made me promise to move in after she was gone, as she didn't want strangers living in the dream house we had worked so hard for together. So I spend my days alone, although I am constantly surrounded by her.

Most of the houses here are holiday homes. They stand empty for long periods of the year, and in the summer they fill with tourists – those that can afford the ridiculous weekly rates for a rental – and local people who have either had the houses in their families for decades or were fortunate enough to buy at the right time. Few people move in permanently. Because of this there isn't any sense of community and people rarely acknowledge their neighbours. And so for company I have to make do with the echoes of my wife's voice.

I suppose it was company I was looking for when I invited my new neighbour over for a drink one afternoon. He was just getting out of his car in the driveway as I was walking back from the beach. As usual he was dressed formally in a suit. He nodded at me, and I walked over and stretched my hand out to him.

"Dennis Moorcraft," I said, feeling his smooth fingers tentatively squeeze my hand.

"Bradshaw."

Later I would read in the newspapers that this was his Christian name. He seemed slightly surprised when I suggested he join me for a sundowner or two, and he glanced at his driver, who was scrutinizing me with heavy-lidded eyes, before politely accepting my offer.

From my pool deck there is an unrestricted view of the Atlantic. My wife had designed it so that it would be the ideal spot to watch the sun setting over the sea. With the ocean so near, and the sounds of the waves as constant as a heartbeat, it sometimes feels as though I'm sitting aboard an ocean liner. As my brother, who now lives in Canada, once said when he came out on a visit, "It's like standing on the upper deck of the *Titanic*."

Bradshaw and I sat side by side, facing out to sea, he in a linen suit and tie, me in a golf shirt and Bermuda shorts. My eyes were drawn to his hands, which seemed to hang in the air in front of him as he spoke, as though they were wet and he was waiting for someone to pass him a hand towel. From time to time he would straighten and bend his wrists to emphasize certain points of his conversation. His fingers were long and thin, like the teeth of a comb, and the nails were in immaculate condition. In fact, everything about him and his clothing was precise and carefully measured. Before speaking, and between sentences, he would suck in his lips and it almost looked as if he were checking the words in his mouth, rolling them over with his tongue, before letting them out.

He appeared to be about my age, but his face did not bear the creases and folds that mine had. We made cautious inquiries about one another's background, as strangers do, and how we had come to be living where we were. He kept his questions vague and circumspect, and I got the impression that he wished me to do the same.

It turned out he was not from South Africa. He was, he said, a businessman from a neighbouring country. From what I could gather he was involved in imports and exports. However he was gradually phasing himself out of his work and he hoped to be fully retired within three months. When I asked him about his family he shrugged and said, "They may visit from time to time." I thought it odd that he would move all this way on his own, particularly when he had such a large house, but then I realized that I was in a similar position and I ushered the conversation on to a less personal subject.

We discovered that we had both spent some time in England. He had studied at the London School of Economics, and I had spent several years working in advertising in London before coming home to start up my own agency. We were drinking Scotch on the rocks, and by the time I'd refreshed our glasses for the third time we were both sitting a little lower in our chairs. Bradshaw's hands became more animated as he spoke.

"A few months ago," he said, "I had to entertain some English businessmen. At the end of their stay I asked them how they liked my country and one of them said, 'Well, it's not England'; and I replied, 'Oh, so you like it then?'"

We both laughed out loud at this, and he reached over and squeezed my forearm. After reminiscing about our experiences in England, we fell into a contented silence. Perhaps it was the Scotch, but I hoped that Bradshaw and I might become friends. We seemed to share a lot of common ground and, although neither of us mentioned it, I think we both realised that, on the whole, life had been good to us, and we shared a sense of common relief at having got to where we were. No doubt we had very different lives to look back on, but somehow

we had ended up together, as neighbours, each retired and alone in a cavernous house.

Later, as I walked him back to the front door, he stopped to study some of the paintings hanging in the hallway. There were seven in total, and they ranged in size from two feet by four feet to six feet by eight feet. They were mostly abstract, although they were composed around natural forms – the rings of a seashell, the bark of a tree, the veins of a leaf. Sometimes parts of the actual objects were mixed into the oils to give the paintings added texture. The lines of the shape were then repeated over and over again, like ripples in water, and by the time these ripples reached the edge of the canvas the original form had evolved into a series of reverberations of itself.

With his glasses in his hand Bradshaw pointed to the largest canvas, which depicted an intricate series of lines around the skull of a rat, and asked, “This is an original?”

“Yes, my daughter is a painter. They’re all hers.”

He squinted at the signature in the bottom right-hand corner and nodded. “Ah, Melissa Moorcraft. Her name is familiar, actually.”

“She has done quite well for herself. Do you like art, then?”

“Oh yes. I have a little collection. You should come over one night this week and have a look.”

“Thank you. Melissa is going to be coming down from Johannesburg soon, so perhaps we could also get together then. I’m sure she’d be interested to meet you.”

“I’d be honoured to meet such a talented artist.”

We said our good nights and he repeated his invitation for me to come over to his house. But after that evening his house stood dark and silent, with curtains drawn, for three or four weeks, and I presumed he’d been called away on some urgent business.

Melissa arrived during Bradshaw’s absence. Ever since the death of my wife, I’d been campaigning for her to move down to Cape Town. But already, at the age of 31, she was set in her ways, and she was determined to keep on living in the house in Johannesburg. It was as if she could not live beyond the walls of the house and its foundations, which were firmly embedded in the past. Perhaps it was because she felt she was closer than the rest of us to her mother and that she was therefore duty-bound to preserve her memory in bricks and mortar.

Two years ago, she had the house converted into a gallery for her work, though her brothers and I had asked her to move out so that we could sell it. I did not impose any time limits on my children with regards to the mourning of their

mother, particularly with Melissa, as she was the youngest; but after three years I felt that it was time for us all to close that chapter in our lives and to start looking ahead again. Melissa's visits to Cape Town were constantly shadowed by these issues.

As always, she had come to paint. Two or three times a year she liked to escape her day-to-day surroundings, come to Cape Town, and work on a new series of paintings. She used one of the spare rooms as a studio and after breakfast she'd excuse herself and disappear until I called her for lunch. That was our routine. In the afternoons we'd walk on the beach or take a drive. She always had her Polaroid camera with her and I was used to having to slam on the brakes and pull over whenever we passed something – a rock, a farmhouse, a horizon line – which she thought she could use in a painting.

We had parked on the edge of a forest so that she could capture the texture of the arthritic-looking limb of a pine tree when I mentioned my new neighbour.

"He sounds a bit weird," she said as she waited for a Polaroid of the tree to develop. "Why do you think he's on his own?"

"Don't know. Maybe his family will move down when he's fully retired. Or perhaps he's divorced. Anyway, I'm sure you'll have a chance to meet him one of these days."

That evening was unusually warm, and Melissa and I ate dinner out on the deck. Afterward we drank red wine and smoked as the sea played its usual symphony on the rocks below. Occasionally, Melissa liked to smoke a joint. Although I disapproved I preferred her to do it in front of me rather than sneak around behind my back. She also became very chatty when she smoked, and I enjoyed our after-dinner conversations.

"Uncle Bruce might be coming out for Christmas," I said, referring to my brother in Canada.

"Well, don't expect me to be here if he does," she said. Her knees were pulled up under her chin and she was hugging her shins. "He's never got a good word to say about this country, but he's only too happy to come back once a year and sponge off you."

"He's my brother. I don't consider it sponging. And he's got plenty of good things to say. Why do you think he comes back almost every December?"

"Have you ever experienced a Canadian winter?"

"You're just cynical."

"I'm cynical? He's the one who stood out here last time and said it was like the upper bloody deck of the *Titanic*. If people want to emigrate that's fine. But they shouldn't be allowed back into the country afterward. It's like leaving your husband or wife and only popping back now and again for a quick shag." She

plucked a piece of weed from her tongue and flicked it away.

We were silent for a few minutes and then I asked, "How is Jo'burg? Are you still happy up there? There's plenty of room here if you ever –"

"Dad... I wish you wouldn't bring this up every time. There's a fat fucking chance of me moving to Cape Town. All my friends are in Jo'burg, my work is there, I love the old house and, anyway, we'd drive each other nuts. And this place feels like an abandoned holiday resort for most of the year – all these houses like empty seashells."

I must have looked hurt, because she said sorry and leaned over to kiss me. She smoked the rest of the joint and I finished off the wine. And then she cleared the table and I carried in the cushions from the chairs. As I walked inside I looked up to Bradshaw's bedroom window and thought I saw the curtain moving.

The next day, after Melissa had emerged from her morning in the makeshift studio, we decided to take a picnic down to the beach. Although it wasn't a particularly warm day the sky was clear and the air was still. I think it was the last fair day we had before the winter clouds rolled in. As it was a weekday, we practically had the beach to ourselves. While I unpacked the picnic basket Melissa stripped down to her bikini and briefly endured the sharp Atlantic water. For a moment, as she trotted back to her towel, she could have been her mother. She had the same springy rust-coloured hair and pale skin; I could clearly see the blue highways of veins that transported her mother's remaining blood along the contours of her spindly legs. It was only in the eyes that Melissa differed greatly from her mother: her mother's were a life-giving green, whereas Melissa's were the colour of an overcast sky.

We ate some ham-and-cheese rolls and then settled down on our towels. I had brought the newspaper with me and Melissa had her iPod. She placed the headphones over her ears, removed her bikini top, and lay back to gather what sun she could. I hid behind my newspaper.

I suppose I must have fallen asleep. When I surfaced again my face was in shadow. A familiar voice floated in over the waves breaking on the beach: "Good afternoon, Dennis." It was Bradshaw.

I blinked, then stood up and shook his hand. He was wearing a long-sleeved collared shirt with no tie and formal trousers, which he'd carefully rolled up over his ankles to reveal his elegant feet.

"You've been away some time."

"Yes," said Bradshaw, his eyes skimming over Melissa's body. "I had to attend to some matters at home. I'm looking forward to some rest now."

"I'm afraid you may have missed the last of the good weather."

"Oh, I don't mind. The beach doesn't really appeal to me."

"Well, when you've had some rest you should come over again. My daughter, Melissa, is staying with me." I pointed to Melissa, but as I did so I remembered that she was topless and I dropped my hand to my side.

"Yes, I noticed. The artist."

"She's been quite busy with some new work, actually."

"Really? I'd be very interested to meet her. I'm looking to add to my collection."

"Perhaps tomorrow night then?"

"I look forward to it."

He wandered off down the beach, and I lit a cigarette. And all the while Melissa lay on her back, with a T-shirt covering her face and the iPod shouting in her ears.

"You should have said something to me," she said later, as we prepared supper in the kitchen.

"How? You were listening to music. And it was awkward with you topless and everything."

"Oh, don't be such a prude, Dad."

"I think he was probably more embarrassed than I was. He didn't stick around for too long."

"I'm sure he's seen plenty of breasts before."

"Maybe," I said, although for some reason it was hard to imagine Bradshaw having been with a woman.

Bradshaw came by as arranged the next evening, and I introduced him to Melissa. They were still shaking hands when Bradshaw began to speak about her paintings.

"I find your work very charming," he said. "Have you ever worked in just pencil or charcoal?"

"Not since I was an undergrad. People know me more for my textured layers than anything else."

And as she spoke I could see the young Melissa emerging from within the invisible layers in which she had repeatedly wrapped herself since her mother's death. I was startled at how easily Bradshaw had pierced this armour. Melissa stood with one leg behind the other, just as she used to do as a teenager when she wanted pocket money or some other favour from me.

"Well, it's easy to see why you're so well known."

"Dad says you have a collection of your own."

"Just a small one," he said with a thin smile. "I don't like to keep too many

pieces down here in the sea air: it can be a very corrupting influence."

We went through to the lounge where I had managed to get the first fire of the winter going in the fireplace. Bradshaw sat next to Melissa on the sofa facing the fireplace, and I sat in an armchair to the side. We made small talk about other local artists, where to eat out in Cape Town, wine estates that Bradshaw was curious to visit, books, and generally anything that didn't involve politics or religion. The conversation eventually came round to family. Up until then Bradshaw had divulged little about his personal life, but now, with the help of three or four glasses of wine, he gradually began to let down his defences.

"My children are working in America," he said. After a pause he added, "It's good for them to travel."

"Are they going to stay there?" asked Melissa.

"Well, they were schooled there and afterward they came back to stay with me. But they had started to see the world differently and struggled to adjust to our African ways. I try to visit them once or twice a year."

"And your wife?"

"We're divorced. She never adapted to life here. America is her home. Atlanta. It's funny, don't you think? I sometimes meet American businessmen... sorry, African-American businessmen, who tell me how much they love coming back 'home' to Africa. And then I tell them that my wife and children have chosen to leave Africa and live in America. In the South. I can't imagine what their ancestors must think!"

"That is pretty ironic," said Melissa, topping up Bradshaw's glass.

"It is harder these days to try and keep a family together. Geographically anyway," I said.

"Every family is different though, Dad. Some work better when they're split up all over the place. Like ours."

"I don't think we're better off than when we were under one roof."

Turning to Bradshaw, Melissa said, "Dad keeps wanting me to move down to Cape Town to live here with him."

"And you don't want to?"

"I have my reasons."

"In my culture the children are expected to look after their parents when they get old."

"So what about your children?"

"Are you saying I'm old?"

For once Melissa was lost for words.

Bradshaw smiled and then his face went serious again. "I'm not sure if they ever considered themselves to be a part of my culture. They were always closer

to their mother."

"God, families can be so complicated," said Melissa.

"From the outside," said Bradshaw, "they appear simple enough: two parents and children. Or sometimes one parent," he added with a glance in my direction. "But it's only once you've been invited inside the family that you get an understanding of all the little intricacies. It's like going backstage at a theatre. Only then are you aware of all the ropes and struts that hold the different scenes in place, and how thin and flimsy the painted houses appear, when from the stalls they seemed as solid as brick and cement. I've always enjoyed going backstage. It teaches you about deception."

Then Bradshaw looked at his watch and drained his glass. "I'm terribly sorry, I've been jabbering on without realising how late it is."

He thanked us and we walked him to the front door. After complimenting Melissa once more on her work, he wished us good night. When he was gone Melissa joined me on the deck for one of her 'cigarettes'.

"What a nice man," she said.

"He is. There's something very sad about him though."

"Why, because he's all alone with no family to share his big house?"

"You know what I mean."

"He seems happy enough to me."

We smoked in silence until Bradshaw's bedroom light came on. "Come," I said, "let's go inside before he thinks we're spying on him."

"Don't you think it's him who's spying on us?"

"No. But I do think you smoke too much of that stuff."

"Another reason why I'm not going to move to Cape Town."

When the doorbell rang just after ten o'clock the next morning, it took me a moment to recognise Bradshaw's driver, as he was wearing dark shades.

"Is Melissa in?" he asked.

"Yes. What is this about?"

"I have an invitation for her."

"From Bradshaw?"

"He would like Melissa to accompany him to look at some vineyards."

"He would? Oh, well, I'm not sure. You see, she's very busy right now. Painting."

The driver showed no sign of comprehending this information, or perhaps he sensed in my reply a thinly veiled tone of suspicion.

"If you don't mind, I would rather she declined the invitation herself."

We stood and stared at one another for several seconds as I tried to think of a

plausible reason why Melissa couldn't accept. But my mind was too occupied with the possible consequences of Bradshaw's invitation, and no convincing excuses were forthcoming. Eventually I muttered a feeble, "Right, right. Of course."

I knocked on the door of the room Melissa painted in and repeated the invitation to her.

"What the hell do I know about wine?" she said from the other side of the door.

"Exactly. Shall I tell him you're too busy?"

"Uh. No. It's OK – I'm not being very productive today anyway. It might be fun to do some wine tasting."

"You sure? Don't feel obliged. Your work should come first."

She opened the door. "It's fine, Dad. Tell him I'll be five minutes."

As I walked back down to the front door I wondered why Bradshaw had sent his driver over for Melissa. Was he embarrassed to invite my daughter out face-to-face? Was it less awkward for him like this? Did he think that this was the best way to explain that I wasn't invited?

When Melissa came down the stairs I saw that she had put on some make-up, something she hadn't done in all the time she had been here with me. She was wearing perfume, too. She kissed me on the cheek and then walked away with the driver.

I spent the day trying to convince myself that there was nothing disturbing about Bradshaw's invitation to Melissa. After all, he was a respectable man. It didn't matter that he was a stranger from another country and old enough to be her father: he simply needed someone to buy wine with, someone who knew something about the local estates. But obviously not me. Of course I realized I was thinking like a paranoid parent. If I was to prove to Melissa that we were capable of living together like two adults, I would have to show some restraint by not interfering in her personal life. But I couldn't ignore the parent in me.

At four in the afternoon I tried phoning Melissa to find out where she was, only to hear her cellphone ringing in the bedroom where she'd left it. I pretended to take a stroll down to the beach, even though it was cool and cloudy, just so that I could walk past Bradshaw's house to look for signs of life. Nothing. I didn't have Bradshaw's cellphone number, in fact I didn't even know if he had one, and his home number was not listed in the book. Already I had begun to regret introducing him to my daughter. I wondered what my wife would have done. She and Melissa had been very close. Two girls against three boys. She had dealt with Melissa during her difficult teenage years, while I had spent my days and most of the evenings at the office, working for a comfortable retirement. For this.

It had been dark for some time when I heard the front door open and close.

Melissa appeared in the lounge as if she'd only been out for five minutes. Her cheeks were flushed.

"So? How was it?" I asked as nonchalantly as I could.

"Cool! I feel like I've been on a grand tour of the Western Cape though. He bought a shitload of wine. And then we had dinner and he's just shown me around his house. Did you know that he has three original Chagalls?"

"Oh? Wow. Where did you have dinner?"

"La Colombe. Pretentious as all hell. But at least he insisted on paying."

"That's nice."

She flopped down on the couch next to me. I noticed that her teeth were tinted purple from wine. Then: "Guess what?"

"I don't know, what?"

"Bradshaw asked me to paint his portrait."

"Portraits aren't really your thing, are they?"

"For 120,000 rand they fucking well are."

"You're kidding. He's going to pay you that for a picture?"

"Why do you sound so surprised? I've sold paintings for more than that before."

"I know, I know. I'm just... when does he want it by?"

"He says I can take as long as I like. So, if it's OK with you, I may extend my stay a bit."

"That's great. Stay as long as you need. That's really good news, Mel. Well done."

And so the next morning, instead of going off to the spare room to paint, Melissa took a sketch pad, pencils, and her camera over to Bradshaw's house. She returned at midday with rough compositions and a series of close-up photographs of Bradshaw's polished hands. That's where you capture the essence of a person, she said, in their hands. She spent several days working out a composition and she repeatedly tried to convince Bradshaw to consider wearing something other than a suit and tie for the painting. In the end they compromised on a white, long-sleeved collared shirt and navy suit pants. I was not privy to any of these sittings or discussions. Often they would go into the city for dinner and to talk about the portrait, and I would be in bed long before Melissa returned home. But she was excited about the project and it made me proud to see how professional and thorough she was. And who knew, perhaps a stint of work in Cape Town would make her feel differently about living here.

For two weeks I hardly saw Melissa. I found signs of her in the kitchen – breadcrumbs on the table and soggy teabags in the sink – and sometimes she'd

leave notes asking me to take her laundry out of the washing machine and put it in the dryer, or to buy more groceries. It was clear that our holiday time together was over. The studio she had set up in one of the spare rooms had been transplanted into Bradshaw's house, and it was there that she spent her days, often working deep into the night.

Late one evening I went out onto the deck for a cigarette before bed. I had eaten alone and tried unsuccessfully to watch an old Ingmar Bergman movie on television, but my concentration span had somehow shrunk or been tampered with by the sea air. The wind was gusting up from the ocean and it took four matches to light my cigarette. There was music on the wind: a woman's melancholic voice accompanied by a piano. It was coming from Bradshaw's house. His bedroom light was on and the curtains were drawn. Probably the old boy's lullaby music, I thought to myself. And then the door leading onto the bedroom balcony opened and Melissa stepped out into the night. Whether she saw me or not I can't say, but she turned to go back inside almost immediately and the music was silenced and the bedroom darkened. From my deck it was hard to say what she had been wearing, however, as she'd turned to go back inside, I thought I'd seen, in silhouette, a clear profile of her breasts.

The next morning Melissa's bedroom gave no clue as to whether or not she'd spent the night there. Her bed hadn't been made in days, and her clothes were scattered around the room. After breakfast I went over to Bradshaw's house. Bradshaw's driver answered the door, and I was asked to wait in the marmoreal foyer as he went off to find Melissa. A painting on the wall, presumably one of the Chagalls, depicted a woman floating upside down in a starry night sky. Melissa eventually came down the stairs, barefoot and wearing an oversize paisley-patterned dressing gown.

"Is this what you paint in these days?" I said.

"I worked late and decided to stay over. In a guest room. There's no need to get all excited."

"I came to see how you were doing. If you needed any supplies of new paint or brushes."

"Dad, I'm fine, honestly. I've just got to finish up something and then I'll come over. OK?"

She gave me a hug and pressed her face against my chest. Her hair was oily.

Later, after she'd returned to my house, I asked her how the portrait was going and how soon she expected to complete it.

"I don't know. Probably a week or two more. I've made a couple of false starts but I think the one I'm doing now is working well."

"Is Bradshaw pleased with it?"

“He’s not allowed to see it until the end. Neither are you.”

“And outside of the painting?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean what else is going on over there? I hardly see you any more.”

“Dad, I’ve been working. You see, this is why I could never live here with you: you’re constantly watching over me.”

“I’m not watching over you. But what am I meant to think when you spend all day and night next door?”

“That I’m working bloody hard!”

And then she was gone again for several more days.

I first noticed the man when I was returning from Hout Bay one afternoon. I had gone down to the harbour to buy some yellowtail for dinner and as I pulled into my driveway I saw a small Japanese hatchback parked a little way up the street. He was sitting in the driver’s seat, sipping from a Coke can. It looked like he was waiting for someone. I didn’t think much of it at first, and even when I saw him in the same place the next morning I wasn’t too concerned. It was only when I saw him again that evening, sitting alone in the car, staring down the street, that I became suspicious and started to look at him a little closer. He didn’t seem to care that I was beginning to take an interest in him.

The passage outside my bedroom has a window facing out onto the street, and from up there I had a clear view of the man. He wore a T-shirt and jeans, and his face and head were cleanly shaven. I watched as he answered a call on his cellphone and I noticed that there was a camera on the dashboard. After a lengthy conversation he put the phone down and adjusted his seat so that he was almost in a horizontal position. That was when he saw me. I pulled my head back and felt my face flush with blood. Fool! What did I think I was doing, spying on someone in the street just because he didn’t look like the kind of person who would own a house here? I had become like the other people in the neighbourhood: people Melissa criticized for living insulated lives behind high walls and security fences.

Feeling like a child caught out, I turned to go downstairs. But then the doorbell rang. I went back to the window and looked out at the car. It was empty. The doorbell rang again. And then there was a loud rapping on the front door. Hard knuckles, I thought. I stayed where I was, thinking how ridiculous I was being, yet at the same time just wanting to be left alone. The doorbell rang twice more and then there was silence. After a minute I heard a car door close. The engine started and I heard what sounded like a can being crushed under a wheel as the car drove off. When I looked out the window again the hatchback was gone. Only a small puddle of oil and a flattened Coke can remained.

The next morning there was no sign of the hatchback and its lone driver. I put it down to one of those strange occurrences that happens daily in cities. Melissa was already over at Bradshaw's house, and I drank coffee on my own in the kitchen. There was no rush for me to do anything – a feeling I wasn't yet sure I was comfortable with in my retirement. I showered and dressed and decided to take a drive into Camps Bay to pick up a newspaper. The ocean was grey, and a southwesterly wind was beginning to push a bank of low clouds in over the sea toward the rocky shoreline. Large clumps of kelp, looking like nests of glistening eels, were washing up in the breakers. As I approached Bakoven, I passed the Japanese hatchback heading in the opposite direction. There were two passengers with the driver.

When I returned home with the newspaper the hatchback was parked outside Bradshaw's house. The three occupants of the car were standing outside having a discussion. One of the men had what looked like a television news camera mounted on his shoulder, and the shaven-headed man was now wearing a suit. As I pulled into my driveway the shaven-headed man approached me. He indicated for me to lower my window. I opened it a couple of inches and he leaned forward and asked, "Do you know the owner of this house?"

He pointed at Bradshaw's house.

"No," I said without hesitation, even though I knew my daughter was inside painting Bradshaw at that very moment.

"When did you last see him?"

"I don't keep track of my neighbour's activities."

The man looked back at his two companions and shook his head. It was only when I sat down in the lounge and opened the newspaper that I realized what was going on. An article on the second page reported that Bradshaw Muchabaiwa, 65, brother of his homeland's finance minister, Gideon Muchabaiwa, was under investigation for charges of corruption and illegal dealings in foreign currency. Gideon Muchabaiwa had also been implicated, but through his lawyer he had released a statement defending the dealings as "family investments", adding that he had "nothing to hide" as all of his and his brother's financial dealings were "above board." There was no comment from Bradshaw as he was "currently out of the country on business". The investigations would be continuing, the article concluded.

No doubt Bradshaw had already heard the news. Would he have mentioned anything to Melissa? I went upstairs and looked out the window onto the street. One of the passengers from the hatchback was filming Bradshaw's house while the shaven-headed man stood in front of the camera and spoke into a microphone. I tried phoning Melissa but her cellphone was off. She had to get out of the house

before it was besieged by the media. But the last thing I wanted was to be filmed knocking on Bradshaw's front door and asking for my daughter back. And I was sure Melissa didn't need that kind of publicity. Within an hour four more news crews were setting up outside Bradshaw's house.

Melissa phoned me and told me not to worry.

"It's just a political thing," she said. "There's an election coming up and there's a whole lot of mudslinging going on. It'll die down in a day or two when they can't find any evidence. Bradshaw's not that kind of man, Dad."

"Whether he's innocent or not doesn't really matter to me. But you're getting caught up in something that has nothing to do with you. Come home and we'll go away somewhere for a few days. Take a break."

"I'm not leaving Bradshaw on his own."

"He has his driver."

"You don't understand. I want to stay with him."

"What?"

"I'll explain later. Although I doubt you'll understand. But I'm happy, Dad. I'm happy with Bradshaw."

"Happy in what sense? A relationship? Is that what you're trying to tell me?"

"Yes."

"Since when?"

"Not long. But I know it's what I want."

"He could be gone tomorrow, back in his home country, standing trial. I mean, you hardly know him, for Christ's sake!"

"This isn't about what the newspapers say, is it. Come on, Dad. Is it his age? His colour? What?"

"I'm just worried, Melissa. Can you understand that? Can you understand someone else's feelings for once?"

"Fuck you."

"Please. Melissa. Why don't you come over and we can talk about this properly?"

"I've made up my mind already. This thing will pass in a day or two. It's just rumours. You'll see."

That night the rumours were on television. Bradshaw's house and its worth were displayed across the screen for all the world to see. There were scenes of people queuing for bread and petrol in his homeland, juxtaposed with the sea views from his house next door to mine. A crowd bristling with sticks and placards was demonstrating outside his brother's house in the capital city. Another house, alleged to belong to Bradshaw, was shown being ransacked and looted. I switched off the television and poured myself a drink. Melissa had left several Polaroids of

Bradshaw's hands on the dining-room table. The knuckles on his fingers bulged out like full pockets. Once again I noted how well kept the nails were. How, I thought, could a man who paid such close attention to small details get himself into a situation like this? And then I thought of the fingers working loose the buttons on my daughter's clothing and I turned the Polaroids face down on the table and went to bed.

The English reporter who knocked on my car window the next day said he was from the BBC. He wanted to know if I knew the woman in Bradshaw's house. I had just returned from buying three different newspapers – two English, one Afrikaans – and had noted that all of them were leading with a story on Bradshaw. One of them had a picture of Bradshaw and Melissa eating out at an expensive restaurant and the caption identified her as “acclaimed local artist, Melissa Moorcraft (31).”

“I'm not aware of what goes on next door,” I said.

“Isn't your name Dennis Moorcraft?”

“Why?”

“The woman's name is Melissa Moorcraft. I thought you might know her.”

“I'm sorry, I have nothing to tell you.”

“No! No, you can't do that!” Bradshaw's driver was striding out from the house toward the reporter and me. Before the reporter could say anything the driver took him by the collar of his shirt and pushed him up against my car. By the time I'd stepped out to try to intervene the driver had turned back to the house and the reporter was kneeling on the driveway, blood streaming from both nostrils.

“Bloody hell,” he said. His colleagues came over and helped him back to their car. Someone had filmed the whole thing.

I went over the papers in my lounge. There were calls for Bradshaw to be extradited to face the charges against him. An “unidentified but reliable source” had come forward with new evidence and his brother was said to be “assisting” the police with their inquiries. As I had said to Melissa, it was of no concern to me whether Bradshaw was innocent or guilty; but he had, quite literally, brought trouble to my doorstep and he was involving my daughter in his affairs, even if it was by her own will, and I felt that sooner or later I would have to confront him and ask him what he planned to do next and, more to the point, what his intentions were with my daughter.

The police arrived that afternoon. Two bored-looking constables took a statement from me regarding the assault on the journalist, and I told them exactly what I had seen. I had to lend them a pen as their ballpoint had run out of ink. And then they went and knocked – rather optimistically I thought – on Bradshaw's

front door. There was no reply. After a brief discussion between themselves they drove away.

That night was the turning point in the whole matter.

Melissa phoned me a short while before the evening news. Something had happened to Gideon, Bradshaw's brother. He had been returning from a police station, where he had been questioned with his lawyer, when his car was attacked by a mob. The car had been set alight and Gideon had tried to run away. He hadn't stood a chance. His smouldering body was flashed briefly on the news later that evening. Bradshaw was obviously deeply upset, said Melissa, and his driver had not been seen for some hours.

"What now?" I said.

"I'm not sure."

"Come home. This has gone too far."

"I can't just leave him."

"Dammit, Melissa. It's not your business. Let him sort it out. Otherwise you'll be in more trouble than you know."

"We'll think of something."

"Like what?"

"I don't know yet."

I suppose that was the last chance I had to speak some sense to her – when we spoke again there just wasn't enough time. But I'm not sure I could have made any difference. It was like watching a glass topple at the edge of a table and knowing that you will not reach it in time to stop it from falling and shattering. That night I went to bed knowing that I would have to live with whatever happened, and I did not sleep very deeply. As a result the phone call at three-thirty in the morning didn't disrupt any dreams. It was Melissa. She was outside my front door. When I went downstairs I saw Bradshaw's car in the road with the engine running. Bradshaw was behind the wheel. He did not look at me. There were no other cars, no television crews or journalists. They would be back at first light.

"We're leaving," said Melissa. "I need to get some of my stuff."

I followed her up to her bedroom. "Where are you going?"

"I'll let you know when we're there."

"You don't have to do this. Do you realise what you're giving up for this man?"

"I've told you. This is what I want."

"I'm going to speak to him then," I said.

"It won't help. He has asked me to stay behind too. It's not his decision that I'm going."

She was picking up dirty clothing off the floor and stuffing it into a tote bag.

"Please tell me where you're going."

"I can't, Dad. I'll email you."

"They'll find you. You're not exactly an inconspicuous couple."

"We'll sort it out."

"They'll freeze Bradshaw's bank account, if they haven't already done so. You won't survive long."

Melissa zipped up the bag. "We've already thought about that."

I followed her out the front door and to the car, which was still idling in the road. Melissa hugged me then and I felt my throat close up and my eyes start to sting.

"Come back," I said.

"Don't worry."

She climbed in next to Bradshaw and I bent over to speak to him. But as Melissa closed the door the car pulled away and I was left standing in the street in my underwear.

That was all last year. I get the occasional email from Melissa. It's impossible to tell if she's in Africa, America or Australia. She mentions a villa near the ocean. Is it the same ocean I stare out at from my deck?

She says she is healthy and happy and painting many pictures. In the end, I suppose, we have to make our own choices, take what we can while we can, so that our final years are comfortable. Isn't that the aim: to build up as much padding as possible in order to soften the impact of death?

After sending Melissa a reply (regards to Bradshaw) I switch off the computer and leave the study. My house is the envy of many people, I'm sure. But my life echoes back at me when I walk through it. I stand in the doorways of the spare rooms and look at the bare beds, their stiff mattresses not yet patterned by archipelagos of stains from spilt bodily fluids. In the lounge I pass the huge yellowwood dining table, a desert plain. I make tea in the kitchen, feeling like a priest pouring wine in an empty cathedral. And then I step out onto my deck and scan the vast horizon.

Alistair Morgan was born in Johannesburg and lives in Cape Town. 'Icebergs' is his first story to appear in print and was first published in *The Paris Review* 183, New York, 2008.