from *A Book of Rooms*
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The Room of Maybe

Black & white light. Dog-eared.

At the
back of a house in Greyling Street there is a room that comes in
and out of focus
as he slowly moves his head There is another room before this
one even – of this
he is certain – but it is so indistinct that only a small wooden bed
with low sides
remains embedded in his memory Together with the smell of the
brown shoe polish
(always Nugget) that his mother smears onto an old *lappie* at
night and pins inside
his little vest to stop him coughing And the underwater sound of
his own small voice
calling up to her from out of the drowned end of a dark passageway
The room
(the back one) is a junk room, work room, sewing room before it
becomes his bedroom
and much later that of his younger brother Because they
argue all the time and
cannot share anything between them The room is rectangular
and on its longest sides
directly opposite each other, there are two doors One door leads
into the lounge where
he plays on the carpet with his plastic soldiers and his wooden
blocks and his large
Buddy-L trucks (a cool-drink delivery truck, a flat-bed truck for
carting sand or
wooden blocks, a cement mixer and a panel van with sliding
doors) The other
door secured with a bolt and a padlock and with a black security
gate on the outside
leads straight into the back garden In the back garden there is
a wash-line with five
wire strands, a swing with a cracked wooden seat, an old hibiscus
tree, and further back
a large open area where his *oupa* has a vegetable patch with
beans and potatoes and
mealies, and his father has three stunted orange trees, a large
pile of second-hand bricks
encrusted with green mould, and a stack of rusted metal poles
(’Cause you never
know when you might need them, his father always says) that
attract fat spiders
There is also a third door in his bedroom On the same side as
the one into the back
garden But in the opposite corner This door is never opened
Across this door is
an old mahogany bed that his English mother bought in 1947 in

Johannesburg He is
terrified of all the small things that crawl under this door at night and scuttle about
beneath his bed The bed is very high and when he kneels at the side at night to pray
(Our Father who art in Heaven forgive us our Trespasses) he presses down with his
forearms onto the mattress and lifts his knees high off the ground so the small
crawling things with feelers and claws cannot reach him There is a plastic under-sheet
to protect the mattress from the dreams that crawl up his trouser leg every night and
soak into his sleep, long after he should have outgrown the weakness There are
two large windows that look alternately onto the wash-line at the back (concreted into
the ground by his father to prevent rust ’Cause you got to look after what you got
he always says) and onto the *blinkblaar* hedge that runs all along the side of the house
(and is said to ward off lightning) and at Easter has small fleshy pink fruit that tastes
like absolutely nothing There is absolutely nothing he can do except sink, and sink
deeper, and drown, when he wakes up at the back of the house in the dead of night
with long wet feelers crawling over his face and rough claws around his throat
pulling him down, down into the airless pit beneath his dreams.

The Room of Growing

Bleached light. & swelling hands.

There are two doors
that lead, one outside onto the front stoep with its shiny red
polish, the other into
his sister's bedroom directly behind him There is a long crack in the
wall that opens and
closes depending on the weather There is a wide window with
long green blinds
made out of something that snaps sharply like bubble-wrap if he
bends one of them
The window faces straight onto Greyling Street, which runs left to
right and back again
all day and all night Even on Sundays Even when he is not there
When he is at church
in his little blue safari suit staring up into nowhere, or at school
sitting behind his
scratched desk with his eyes squeezed tight in case the teacher
asks him to read
out loud from their comprehension book about Carol and Roy
who go to the corner
café for their mother, like good children, and buy milk in glass
bottles with shiny
aluminium tops and unsliced Oxenham's white bread in a brown
paper packet
Through the wide window he watches his father drive off every
Friday night in his
brown Ford Cortina XLE (Big 6) with blinds in the back window
And he wonders
where his father goes And why his mother does not go with And
why sometimes he
wishes his father did not ever come back There is a wooden floor
with a small hole in
one plank through which he tries to push his soft penis one night
in imitation of something
he knows not what There is a high ceiling made of long
boards like the floor
but slotted into each other in the tongue-and-groove fashion The
ceiling is painted white
and it is flaking in parts and in other parts there are brown stains
from the leaking
corrugated iron roof There is a heavy old wardrobe in dark imbuia
that used to
belong to his *oupa* In fact long before the room was the boy's it
belonged to his *oupa*
before he passed away in the old Grey's Hospital with his empty
blue eyes staring up
into nowhere The wardrobe has a long narrow mirror in the door
in the centre and deep
pockets of camphor-scented darkness on the inside The mirror

is flanked by a simple
S-shape carved in light relief into the wavy grain There are also two identical secondhand
pine beds One for himself And the other for his much younger brother
Before he moved to the back room Because they argue all the time and cannot
share anything There are two patchwork duvets made by their mother from scraps of
barefoot shame and old shirts, dresses, curtains and pillow slips There is a pine desk
under the window that he has no choice but to share with his brother, although he
prefers doing his schoolwork on his bed with his back against the cracked wall and his
cold feet sticking out over the other side (In this position he writes a long poem
which his mother copies out in her best handwriting and frames about a race of men
with eyes all over their body instead of skin and plastic flippers where their feet should
be) There is a small shortwave transistor radio that plays his favourite programmes
like *Jet Jungle* and *High Adventure* and *Squad Cars* 'They prowl the empty streets at
night, waiting in fast cars, on foot, living with crime and violence' There is also a
bookshelf made by his father from off-cuts scrounged from the factory workshop
and fixed to the wall above the head of his bed for his growing collection of *The Hardy*
Boys and Willard Price Later it will include Louis L'Amour and Edge and Sven Hassel
and the poems of Rod McKuen (with black and white pictures of couples wearing bellbottoms
walking hand in hand on the beach while a big white sun sets behind them)
There is a small tin that he hides amongst the spare batteries, the brylcreem and hankies
the cans of deodorant and nebuliser masks, the dirty bandages and tubes of Betadine
ointment, in the two top drawers of the desk *His* drawers Unlike the bottom drawers
which belong to his brother and are always empty Except for the one occasion when
they were full of Crunchies and Chocolate Logs and packets of Simba chips (Cheese &
Onion and Plain) which his brother stole from Van's Hoek Kafee (at his instigation, though)
and for which his gullible brother was thrashed with a strap by their father in the garage
over and over While he (because he has a hole in his heart, as

his mother screamed
when it came to his turn, when his father went to fetch him from where he was hiding
under the green bench in the lounge) got off (as he always did) with just a warning
(and a smile) from his mother The tin in his top drawer is a flat rectangular Strepsils
tin with a lid held in place by a broad elastic band The tin holds all the luck he needs
to stay upright in assembly with his eyes squeezed tight during the Our Father Forgive
us our Trespasses In case he should fall over or wet himself It goes everywhere
with him Like his hands Like his concave chest Like his memories of blonde
six-year-old Bunty who lived just across the road before the security branch
policeman moved in with his wife and her short crimplene skirts There is the sound
of traffic all day up and down, and people on the pavement outside his window and
black delivery men on bicycles And then a siren goes off somewhere and his
father comes home from the factory for lunch smelling of cocoa beans And afterwards
his father has ten minutes in his high wing-backed chair in the lounge, and suddenly
everything in the house is very still and dark and the boy is underwater again
Under the water where he can hold his breath longer than his brother (who has no
talents to speak of, except being impressionable) Longer than anyone else in the
whole world in fact And he hears the sound of guttural voices knocking against the
low step into his room from the polished front stoep And unknown things that
happen in rustles behind the locked door into his sister's lilac room The door that
locks from her side only Things he spies through the keyhole of the bathroom door
Holding his breath so that she does not hear him Until everything begins to swim
around him And inside him And inside him someone shouts and shouts sharply
And he turns and he runs and he runs out into the back garden Past the garage
Far away into the night that smells of orange blossom and the mint under the leaking
tap and the yesterday-today-and-tomorrow bush and rotting figs that have fallen to the ground.

The Room of Family Holidays

Bright sunlight. Fat smell of frying.

There is a long
window with thick metal burglar bars painted white The window runs the length
of the room and looks out across the deep blue Indian ocean on the south coast of
Natal It is a long narrow room with three single beds One bed is perpendicular to the
room, in the middle, with its head against the back wall facing the ocean (This bed is
reserved for his sister) A second bed is directly underneath the window, and horizontal
to it, at the far end of the room The third bed is in the same position but up against
the back wall The second bed is a source of continual dispute between himself and
his brother Because both boys always want to sleep right by the window so they can
be the first to see the ocean and to see the sun come up This dispute is finally solved
by their father (with the help of his strap) who decides that they must take turns to be
at the window on their annual Christmas holidays Although this still does not prevent
them arguing over who slept there last and whose turn it is this time About to go
into his final year at high school he feels that such squabbles are below him, and he
magnanimously allows his brother access to the bed by the window without any
argument, and with only a superior smile He feels that he is on the brink of something
very significant in his life, something almost adult And though he will perhaps feel
this same overwhelming power again For example when he buys his first car, a 1982
white VW Jetta Mk1, or when he publishes his first – and only – piece of writing, a
rhyming poem on Mother's Day in a consumer tabloid distributed free from local Spar
supermarkets It will never be with the same absolute confidence in his ability to get
what he wants And what he wants now is to find a way to talk to the long-legged blonde
girl who stays in the big cottage at the top of the road, with its own private access
to the beach via a long flight of steps made from old railway sleepers And so he
doubles up on the arm and chest and leg exercises he does with

his expander springs
(the thick ones with the blue handles, not the red ones which are too easy) Even
though his mother warns him not to strain himself And he swims in the surf directly
in front of her house even at high tide (when his mother warns him not to because of
his weak legs and the strong undertow) And he tans himself at low tide on the flat
black rocks in full view of her pathway So that she has no choice but to notice him
And when she smiles at him on the third day and says hello how are you on the fourth
he knows with a certainty as firm as the black rocks that he is chosen And that
he will always get what he wants Just by willing it And on the fifth day she invites
him to her house and into her small bedroom (with a big blue teddy bear on the bed)
and together they listen to a stretched tape of the Beatles' *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely*
Hearts Club Band (I'd love to turn you on) And on New Year's Eve they walk hand
in hand as the white sun sets behind them, along the beach to a party on the wet sand
where he drinks *Spook en Diesel* (just like his father's policemen friends) out of a
polystyrene cup and the blonde girl is asked to dance by an older boy, a university student
he assumes, because of his long hair, who comes to the party in a red beach buggy
with a surf board tied to the top, and who makes the girl laugh by whispering something
in her ear And he (the boy with a hole in his heart, at the heart of this story) feels everything
crumble and slide away beneath his small feet in their differently sized orthopaedic boots
And he leaves without saying anything to the girl And stumbles home along the cold
moonless beach He knows that if he goes home now his mother will want to know
What's wrong? What happened? Are you alright? And she will want to kiss it all
better (As she always does) But he is much too old for all of that stuff now So he
hunches behind a dune smelling of damp vegetation and rotten fish-bait and dog turds
and he sniffs his right hand repeatedly, the hand that held onto hers (and smells of
coconut oil and Simba Puffs) and he licks it and puts it inside his trousers and he waits
until it is midnight and the fire-crackers have died down and he

can open their back
door and creep into the sleeping house And in the morning his mother spoils their
whole family by frying bacon and eggs for breakfast (sunny-side up) with white toast
This is a special treat Just for holidays she says smiling at him Because apart from
his father who eats *mielie pap* every morning for breakfast everyone else always
has Pronutro, regular or chocolate flavoured, with milk and no sugar And that is
that Finish *en klaar* That is the morning when he learns how much easier it always is to pretend than to admit a painful truth.

The Room of Impressions and First Appearances

Grey & drizzling.
With one new character.
On red high heels.

He is wearing
a cream polo-neck jersey with a white vest underneath, a pair of black chinos that his
mother lengthened by letting out the turn-up, old grey school socks, and his favourite
brown Harris tweed jacket that belonged to his grandpa (the father of his mother, not
oupa, his father's father) who bought it in Jo'burg after the war when he came back
from up-North and the only job he could get was as a barman at the Observatory
Golf Club, earning two-and-six for a twelve-hour shift with one day off a week She
is wearing Pure Silk by Lenthéric, with her short black hair in a bob just like his mother
The jacket is his favourite because it makes him look older than he really is and
serious, and because coming back in the bus from the National Schools Festival in
his matric year, the girl with the red hair, who had a boyfriend waiting for her at home
the girl who had shown him how to kiss with an open mouth and a wet tongue (his friends
called it French-kissing), had said that all the writers she had seen in pictures (and other
intense people like security branch policemen) always wore jackets like that
There are three precise rows of white plastic chairs with precisely ten chairs in each row
There is a long trestle table at the back of the room covered with a long white cloth that
hangs to the floor There is an urn on the table and three neat rows of cups and saucers
a stack of small side plates with yellow serviettes and two unmatched dinner
plates with Tennis biscuits and stale Romany Creams (mint flavour) that he stuffs
into his mouth two at a time during interval (in case they are finished before he can
return for seconds) and then chokes on Just like he did at that wedding reception at
the Lions River Country Club when he was ten, when he vomited all over himself, and
everyone thought it was because he had eaten too many stuffed eggs, when really he
had choked on the marble he had been sucking in his mouth (his

lucky smokie) that his
mother always warned him not to There is a Steinway grand piano in the front of
the room with its shining top propped open and beside it three upright chairs without
arms One for the cellist at the end furthest from the piano, and two for the violinists
first and second There are large French doors with a view onto a day without any sky
or sun or colour and only a lonely *Piet-my-vrou* calling And in the doorway he stands
aside to let her pass The way his mother taught him And she smiles and lowers
her eyes The way her experience with other men taught her And he pays for their
tickets The way his father hated doing for anything without haggling first or
wheedling for a discount And all the while he wonders why he accepted her invitation
to come all the way out on a cold grey day to a cold sandstone house in Greytown
to listen to the chamber music of Ernst Bloch Actually he does not mind Classical
music But then it must be popular classics like Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* (with
real cannons) or *Bolero*, which he used to listen to over and over again in the lounge
as a child until his father grew so sick and tired of it he scratched the record with a long
nail Just like that In front of him Finish *en klaar* Finally he concludes that
perhaps he accepted her invitation because she is so much older than him (thirteen
years he finds out later) and a divorcee Which makes him feel grown-up for the first
time in his life And that someone is treating him as a grown-up For the first time
in his life But it might also be because she smokes long cigarettes and wears designer
dresses and high heels like an actress in one of those slow and serious movies (the
black and white kind with subtitles he can never read quickly enough or work out
who is saying what But where all the men wear tweed jackets) He cannot dismiss
the fact that it may even be because, with her long neck and her small head and strong
legs, she reminds him of a praying mantis (She studied as a dancer, before snapping
a tendon and becoming a nurse instead, he finds out later) And though mantises terrify
him (he had read in one of those Did You Know questions on the

inside of a yellow
Chappies bubble-gum which he had twisted his brother's arm to
steal for him, that
the female devours the male after mating) he is the first to admit
their mysterious power
The power to decipher in the old air everything that ordinary
people only find in
the *Reader's Digest* and the *Huisgenoot* or the twelve o'clock rebroadcasts
of 'The Bold and the Beautiful'.

The Room of the First Time

Take the weight on your forearms. She says.
Slowly. Keep the momentum. Yes. Yes.
Don't worry if it doesn't happen the first time.

There is
There is a small pencil triangle (upside down) with a dot in the middle, in the top
left-hand corner of a journal (not a Moleskine, which is too costly, but the Croxley
JD6235 with 128 lined pages and every page empty except for the pencil triangle) that
records the date at the grateful age of twenty-seven years, three months and fourteen
days, when, in a cramped bedroom that smells of hair spray, old make-up and cigarette
smoke, in her mother's second-floor flat overlooking the Oribi airport, he finally
at long last, leaves his long childhood behind There is a large cross in black ink
through the pencil triangle (upside down) with a dot in the middle in the top left-hand
corner of a journal (the Croxley JD6235 with 128 lined pages and every page empty
except for the cross through the pencil triangle) that records the eventual death of his
father from renal failure in a small room that smells of plaster and paint and old vomit
in the brand new state-of-the-art Grey's Hospital on the hill, on the night when no-one
in the whole wide world knows where the hell to find him When at long last, finally
his hands taste and touch and see everything in the whole world they have always wanted.

The first time.
It was over so suddenly
he wondered. What's all the fuss about?
But that did not stop him coming back the next night.
For more.

The Room of Promises

Water. Birds. Stone.

There is
a tall blue sky without any railings He remembers He remembers
the woman saying
Marry me With this body I thee worship Within this place of
basalt and sandstone
we shall make the nesting place for our souls There is a suntanned
wind with
strong legs Catch me! Catch me he says (And he hears, but
he also does not hear
himself using the same voice he used as a child, when he stood
naked and wet and
small on the green plank across the end of the bath and threw
himself into his
mother's smiling arms) Look, look at me I am flying! And the
swallows celebrate
with their quick wings And the cliffs ring with their singing And
the loud voices he
remembers from all of his past, and their long shadows too, are
overwhelmed by water
A clear water welling up from out of the black rocks.