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THE DROP OUT

by

Silke Heiss

(HSSSIL001)

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Supervisor: Professor Geoffrey Haresnape

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This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature:

Date: 9 September 2002

Signed by candidate

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SYNOPSIS

The Drop Out is a *Bildungsroman* in three parts. The reader follows a young European woman's quest for self-discovery. Manja Levsky's journey commences amid the South African white Left during the late 1980s. Manja has two aims: to discover what it means to be a woman; and to create personal independence from the status quo. When the government changes hands, she follows her colleague and boss, Eric Griffin, to Cape Town, where they begin an ambivalent affair. Matters are complicated when Manja falls in love with Eric's late delinquent brother, Theo, and becomes haunted by the latter's notes and drawings. In an effort to free her soul, Manja destroys the commissioned manuscript she has been working on for Eric - an act that compels her to face the dark side of her nature. Through Manja's eyes, the reader is offered insights into a hybrid consciousness balancing her Romantic heritage against a traumatised society in transition.

“Wer an einer Muschel lauscht,
ruft entzückt: Das Meer, es rauscht!
Aber nein, ich bitte sehr,
Was ihr da hört, ist nicht das Meer,
Was da rauscht, ist euer Blut.
Merkt’s euch gut!”

Ruth Krauss

‘It is a woman’s prerogative to change her mind.’
Ja-nee.

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PART 1

A GLIMPSE INTO MANJA LEVSKY'S BIRTH-POOL

Johannesburg, 1987-1993

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Preamble

Is she still a girl? She has come of age. Her breasts and hips are ripe, she has regular periods and she is an eligible voter. Should she therefore call herself a woman, then?

Woman. No - the word is too womby, indeed too manny, for Manja Levsky to feel comfortable about applying it to herself. The best term she can summon, as she stands on tiptoes to see her head and shoulders in the mirror after her shower, is: pupa.

Shapeless: short, plump and waistless with dilated veins netting her décolleté, Manja has to admit that she is neither one thing nor the other. Closed, secret and unseen - this is the essence of her heart. A sticky spun darkness devoid of love, sleeping under a leaf.

Does she recognise the small, livid fist, the mean and desolate spirit as her own? Most likely not or, if so, then only as a thing that troubles, indeed shames her.

It is not the way
of the world to expect
its daughters to sleep tight
in close and unlit chambers.
If girl children be haunted,
pry open the cage, let in
the light, expel the webs
of ghosts! For they must
fly, young women.

Like hosts of butterflies
and powder-patterned moths alike
let them delight us day and night.
If they do not, they drop,
fold back their feelers,
legs and wings and wait,
unheard, sighing their last
in the remembered shade.
Slaked, dry, clear to depart
they know not fear
of dying.

Manja Levsky, pupate - wingless and unfeeling - sits in the communal kitchen of the old, five-bedroomed house in Bellevue East. Opposite her at the huge, stained, wooden table that dominates the space is Hanno Greeve whose patient, perhaps cautious, love for her she nibbles at occasionally, thoughtlessly, as if inside a dream - the way pupate females do. Especially when they depend upon help or advice, as here: "I am going to join Umkhonto we Sizwe," Manja confides vehemently. Hanno stares at her. Let him. Despite her inability to respond to his tender feelings, she does not dislike him. On the contrary. He may be able to assist her in gaining clarity about her decision to join the underground movement's military wing.

"You are brave," he ventures timidly.

"I can't bear it anymore," she replies, "I hate the way things are, this system, the government, the eternal status quo. I want to play a part in its destruction."

"We all hate it," says Hanno.

He watches her stroking together crumbs on the table in time with her words.

"I also feel helpless," continues Hanno, "if only there were more which we could do."

Hanno's voice is high. When he is nervous or exasperated, it sounds like an old woman's pathetic piping.

"Well, there is," retorts Manja in her own strong, deep voice. "Why don't you join as well?"

His air-blue eyes gaze at her in astonishment. She can see his vision: the two of them fighting hand in hand. Running under cover in uniforms, lugging rifles that bounce against their hips and shoulders. Under a bush, face to face. His pasty skin, the softness of his cheeks. She wavers, watching him. Joining in battle, whether with an ally or against an enemy, is surely no less close than is the join of love.

"Do you know what you are saying?" says Hanno.

Manja ushers the crumbs into her cupped hand beneath the table edge.

She gets up and throws them into the bin beside the cats' dirty bowls.

Manja hates the cats. They are neurotic, untrusting, ugly and wild.

Willem never cleans their bowls. Willem never cleans anything. He holds End Conscription Campaign meetings in his room - the largest and most

beautiful in the house - and half the household's cups stand for as long as Manja can bear it. (She is the commune's only female.) She gazes at the bowls in distaste. Then her eyes return to Hanno. She feels them burning him. Or are they flaming back into herself? "These are not my cats," she hisses, "why must I clean their bowls? Look at this mess. Can't he change the newspaper underneath every once in a while?"

Hanno answers Manja's gaze. His eyes, like his body, are large and bulging. It could be that inside his form, too, something else conceals itself. A sharp intelligence, no doubt. Where, after all, does the fine aquiline nose point to? Does he smell which will be the winning horse when he places his bets? Manja straightens her spine irritably. The world must be taken at face value and teeth must be gritted to this end. She will not be puzzled by what others choose to hide.

"Did you hear what I just said?" he queries sharply, "do you know what it is like to fight?"

Manja crosses in front of the stove. It is turned on in order to provide heat. Another one of Willem's luxuries. Manja switches it off sulkily. She re-seats herself on the bench at the table. A silkscreened flock of blue doves - one of Willem's posters - flies up against the wall beside her head.

"I need to do something, Han. I've got to do something!" she says emphatically.

"Can you shoot a person?" says Hanno, "can you lay a bomb?"

Manja is silent. His words are more than humbling. They are destructive of her spirit, which suddenly seems entirely misplaced. Unlike most of Manja's younger male friends, Hanno completed his two years' military service. He has never concealed the extent to which the experience damaged his soul. More often than not, his tales relate an abomination of social togetherness - the deadly waiting for nothing at all by the conscripts in their tents. More time spent killing mind and soul than any ostensible enemy. Is this the real horror of war: no more, no less than the depth of human boredom?

Hanno's translucent eyes glitter with an urgency that completely flattens her.

"What if you are caught?" he asks, now in full swing. "If you were tortured? Raped? Would you be silent? Would you be able not to give away your comrades' names? To endure for their sakes and their safety? Would you?"

Comrades? Manja frowns. She had not considered the fact that in such a war she must necessarily be part of a team. Were she able to shoot, at whom could she ever point a gun, if not solely at herself? Under whose feet does she imagine she could lay a bomb, if not her own alone? To take one's life - a taboo that Manja believes she would break if need be; but to take the life or wholeness of another? She has proved herself capable of sudden, furious - at times physical - violence against people whom she loves, or at least depends upon. Crimes of passion, yes, those fall into the ambit of an experience that she can just grasp. But to attack, maim, and kill others with whom one has no connection - because of a plan laid out in the head? To be forced to stick forever to the fighting lines as drawn by someone else? Hanno is right. She is not with those.

Hanno's voice is pitching high again. "Would you keep your mouth shut? Could you do that?"

'He does not want me gone,' she thinks, 'he wants me here with him.'

"No," she admits, "I don't think I would want to. But I need to do something - for myself," she incants, more weakly now.

He uses the opportunity. "I know I couldn't," he offers, "I would blab. I can't bear pain," he says, "it's something you have to think about. Would secrets, other people's lives, be safe with you even when you are in the greatest pain?"

"I don't know," counters Manja, "I have not been in such a situation. You speak as if it's a foregone conclusion that I will be caught and tortured. I had the idea of joining, because I am searching for a way to - to live, under the circumstances. I'm not looking for a way to die."

"You have to think about what could happen," replies Hanno, "if you could go through with it from beginning to end."

What can she say? He has terrified her. Her fantasy was at last to have found a route of flight, only to discover that her intentions are a show of bravado.

"I don't know," she says at last. "I just don't know. I am so unhappy."

She reaches her hand across the table and lets it lie there. He takes it and holds, gazing at her so lovingly that she feels ashamed.

"I don't want you to go off," he says. "Please don't leave." His voice vibrates and trills like a bird's.

Manja is briefly filled with pride. Hanno took her seriously. He genuinely feared that she might become a soldier in the present conflict. And why not? It is her choice, after all.

"I don't think I can now," she replies, "it doesn't feel real. I'll have to find other ways of fighting."

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At that moment, Willem's door opens and the four or five people who had conferred in his room for over an hour dribble out. As Willem sees them off, one of them joins Hanno and Manja in the gloomy kitchen.

He is a tall, thin man with reddish blond hair down to his shoulders. His goatee is copper-coloured and neatly trimmed. His skin is healthy, almost milky, which gives him a look not so much of purity, however, as of a certain smugness. His fingers are ringed by the handles of six coffee mugs that clink softly as he walks.

"Hi," he says, "I'm Eric."

He goes confidently towards the sink opposite the stove, deposits the mugs carefully and begins to wash them. Manja stares with feelings of disbelief and triumph (over Willem).

"Your mother brought you up well," she says.

Eric looks around over his shoulder at her. Then he returns his gaze to his task.

"I am afraid," he says, "that you are wrong. This is not my mother's doing. Maybe by default." He continues pointedly, "In contrast to my mother, I am a feminist." Then, without looking up, he says, "Do I know you?"

Hanno takes it upon himself to introduce himself and Manja. As with almost all men of Eric's age, Manja notices that he cannot help ignoring Hanno and directing his interest at her: chubby and imperfect, even pupate though she may be, she is, still, a female. As for her, the new arrangement of presences in the kitchen stirs up in her a peculiar sense of her own importance. She gazes, without even intending to, at the newcomer.

"Manja," says he, "that is an unusual name."

He has turned around and, since he cannot find a dishcloth, wipes his hands back and forth against rather dirty denims. The sight of these does not disgust Manja. On the contrary, she finds the grime endearing. Hanno lifts his legs one by one out from under the table and sideways over the bench. His expression is surly. She feels disappointed. Why must he remove himself now?

"Please excuse me," says Hanno, "I am going to bed. Good night."

"Good night, Hanno," says Manja, wishing him to stay. Their important conversation is not concluded. What is she going to do now with this nimble stranger?

Hanno gives her a doleful look and shuffles off to his room, the first in the house to the left of the front door. He only goes there to sleep. She does not know, has never come close to seeing, Hanno. He is as secretive as she. But then, does she really want to know more? She senses the heaviness of a responsibility that this would necessarily entail. It is a responsibility which she would definitely prefer to shirk. For the moment, at least.

Manja turns away from Eric. It would be downright rude for her to leave as well now, so she absorbs herself in the grain of wood on the table. Her fingers follow the shapes intently.

Within seconds, Willem blusters in with the dispersed energy typical of a man who has been host to a meeting.

"Jou, it's cold outside," he says, rubbing his large, hairy hands.

"You're still here," he says to Eric, and then, "hi Manja, who's for some coffee?"

Willem fills the enamelled kettle and puts it on a hot plate.

"Did you switch off the stove?" he asks Manja. He makes no effort to conceal his irritation.

She refuses to look up, but her moving finger on the table stops in its tracks.

"I like warmth," continues Willem.

Manja glowers at him through the dark veil of her hair. Willem's skin is taut over his cheekbones and his eyes glitter dramatically.

"When I say I want the kitchen to be warm," says Willem, "then I mean I want it warm. Do not switch off the stove when I am trying to create a warm house - for us all," he adds self-righteously.

Who - other than her father and the odd teacher - has ever been bold enough to chide her? She finds Willem's rule over the commune chilling. How dare he lecture her? He is the only one with a functional fireplace in his room, while she makes do with jerseys and blankets in order to save money. Yes, she knows that he derives from a stringent, Calvinist upbringing. That he suffered - and continues to suffer - a tyrannical father. She knows, too, that he aims to create a New Order - a different, truly alternative way of being. Why else is she here? She accepted, indeed embraced, this spirit when she signed the paper upon

which communal obligations were spelt out. But that a house that is "free for all" should harbour a skivvy - herself, the unpaid maid - who is forced, moreover, to endure insult and disrespect whenever she does not obey the 'king' - how this might pave the way for socialism Manja cannot see.

Her resentment turns into shame before Eric who is being forced to watch this humiliating spectacle. He stands quite still, notwithstanding his earlier claims to 'feminism'. Pah. Even Willem sports a badge with a ring on a cross upon his jacket lapel. What do they know about Woman, these young, eager men puffing their breasts up with 'feminism'? What vanity!

Eric gazes into space. Willem, satisfied by Manja's mortified silence, puts his hand upon the other man's shoulder.

"Sit down," he says genially.

Eric obeys. Manja seethes with hatred against both of them.

"Have you met Eric, Manja?" Willem asks now, in an even gentler tone than before. He settles himself beside Eric. Manja is really caged in now.

The kettle is starting to pop softly and, relieved at being able to do something, Manja slides out from her sitting place and fetches three cups from the dish rack. She clanks them down upon the table. Willem twinkles at her conciliatorily.

She has to look for another place to stay. She cannot survive under this Boer ruler for another day. What a disappointment he has been.

When she first met him, he read his poems to her in his deep, resonant voice, out of which his guttural mother tongue seemed to rise and roll out like waves on the shore. He seemed to her then like a true comrade. Fighting his personal past with a dream of the future that was free of the dark reins of power. Yet now here he is, inviting every stray street child into the house to mess about with her precious Chinese dolls, toiletries and whatnot, while she has to clean and tidy up afterwards. She feels bitter, because whenever she confronts him - which she does timidly, because she fears him - he accuses her of being bourgeois and reactionary. His New Society will certainly not tolerate idle pleasures such as little doll collections, nor will it indulge the petty satisfactions of privately owned tooth- and hairbrushes. Against such punitive prescriptions Manja has no defence, though she is acutely aware of the injustice of being branded so.

"Eric, tell Manja about your work," continues Willem, "Eric is a hero in the Struggle, trying to save the children," he declares.

Manja spoons coffee and sugar into their cups. Black and bitter for herself, sweet and white for Willem and - she cocks her head towards Eric.

"Half a teaspoon, please," he responds, "only a drop of milk."

"What is it that you do?" she says. "I didn't know there was anything left to do other than kill oneself," she adds morosely, opening the fridge.

"No, anyway," Eric says quickly, "I wouldn't call myself a hero. But I've managed to get some funds, which means that we can keep going for at least another year."

"Eric runs P.S.L. - Project to Support Learning," says Willem. "He is looking for tutors," he adds meaningfully after a pause. "Aren't you?" He smiles at Eric with his wide mouth. Manja can feel it: Willem has plans for her, for them. He sees himself as the orchestrator of the Struggle. Everyone must fall into their places; toe the lines as drawn by Willem himself.

"I've told Willem," Eric submits somewhat grudgingly to the pressure which Willem is applying, "we might see if we can find someone to cram in the year's biology syllabus for the matrics, at least." He gives Manja an inquiring, rather cold glance. "And you? What do you do?" Manja holds her cup between her hands. For some reason, Eric is smiling at her now. There is a peculiar mix of authority and sweetness about him.

"No, nothing," she says, slurping her coffee indecorously. "I'm just studying. I'm a bourgeois nincompoop with nothing but trivial concerns," she adds in a warning tone, looking at Willem, "ask him. He knows."

Manja stares at Eric with her dark, mournful eyes. She has never touched Willem with them - how could she? She does not possess the light he requires for the dungeon of his consciousness; but Eric, she can see, is transfixed. Not that it is her intention to transfix him. Indeed, it is his response to her that fixes her, unfortunately or fortunately, in turn. She is aware that she is playing up to Eric, finding great relief in his respectfulness towards her.

"No," she says, addressing only Eric, "I do want to fight the system. I'm looking for a way of doing so that is appropriate to me."

Eric listens. She is certain that never before has she been listened to so.

"Perhaps," she says, "if you do decide to appoint a biology tutor - " Eric's eyes widen somewhat - "I might like to apply for such a post. I can help people pass matric biology." She pauses, hunches back.

"Sorry," she says, "I'm not trying to influence you. I'm simply desperate to do something that will stop me from being another blind white jellyfish."

Eric downs the last of his coffee, wipes his moustache delicately with his fingertips, and rises to go.

"What we do is simple," he says. "The schools are not functioning. Some of the teachers, even in primary schools, fear to attend, because they could be shot by their pupils or by outsiders who invade the premises. The children can't be said to be attending school. Some of them fight the army, the police, and the vigilantes at night. Most of them are simply terrified and completely unable to think, never mind do any work. Raids and attacks take place all the time, in their houses, on the streets. We aim to provide a refuge, something to hold on to, for those children who are not, in fact, active as soldiers. Who simply want to get their matric even though they also support the idea of liberation in principle."

"Liberation before education! Amandla!" interjects Willem loudly and raises his fist.

"We are tied to the government syllabi," concedes Eric stoically, "that is true. But our whole aim, our methods, are different. We wouldn't be allowed to operate if we didn't offer the Bantu Education syllabus. We are quite devious in our way, you know."

Devious. Manja finds the word simultaneously attractive and repellant. There is something creative and soothing in Eric's argument and yet - is there a flaw? Manja does not possess the brain to work out whether or not there is.

"I know, I know," Willem replies in a reconciliatory tone, "I said you are a hero. Still - it's something to think about. Couldn't you offer alternative setworks, like the Communist Manifesto, for example? I'm serious," he says, raising his eyebrows in response to the snicker that has come from Eric. "Are you not simply prolonging the oppressive régime and the dull minds - the hewers of wood and drawers of water - which it wants to produce, by helping your students to write matric?"

Manja has a sudden, very pleasurable fantasy of herself with a slopping bucket of water on her head, swaying her hips gently as she walks barefoot on warm sand. Is chopping wood and carrying water by definition wrong? It must be. There are machines, after all, which can do these tasks now, freeing all humans to unfold their true potential. Down with hewing and carrying, then! She purses her lips and folds her hands as Eric grunts and shakes his head at Willem. He strokes his goatee almost incessantly. Most likely its growth is quite new. "I wish you nogal luck, comrade," declares Willem, "for tonight I've said my say."

He rises and once again his hand lands on Eric's shoulder as he bids them both a good night. They hear him crumple newspaper and lay some more pieces of wood onto the fire in his room.

Eric strokes his beard and looks at Manja. He smiles. She does not smile back. He clears his throat demonstratively.

"Our offices are in Doornfontein," he says, "if you come by tomorrow, you can collect application forms."

"I will," she says, "thank you."

"It is not up to me alone," says Eric as she sees him out.

There is an irony in Manja's newfound role as educator. Three or four years before she fought tooth and nail against her father, who tried in vain to instil in her a sense that teaching ought to be her object in life.

Anyone who met Olaf (he was more generally known as Oliver) Levsky, Manja knew, might immediately see from whence came her own grumpiness. Manja's father was a defeated, but not unkind, spirit who practised as a teacher of music and 'Basic Techniques' (D.I.Y. for boys only) at a Secondary state school in Benoni. He had taken up residence there in happier times, and had remained after Manja's mother had left him, and the five-year-old child, in favour of a girlfriend in the States. The three-bedroom house was bought cheaply and needed doing-up from the moment they moved in. This feature never altered; rather it became an entrenched way of life over the years. The more Oliver did, the more needed to be done, though why this was the case was not a question it ever occurred either to Manja or her father to ask. Not that Oliver was over-hasty with his home improvements. An inside toilet was finally installed when Manja was eight. The ceilings were beautifully pressed, but the windows, as in all older houses, were small and the rooms were therefore permanently shrouded in their own inner gloom. The garden was initially all concrete, cracking over the roots of several lush fruit trees - which gave Manja ample opportunity to cook plum jam, peach chutney and lemon curd every summer, taking expert instruction from the Afrikaans-speaking neighbour. Later, Oliver took up the concrete and planted patches of grass which, however, required more attention than either he or Manja were able or prepared to provide, so the effort served more as a reminder of possibilities, perhaps greener visions, than an accomplishment in itself. The drought, which has dominated this decade, has not helped, of course.

It was Oliver Levsky's cynicism, more than anything else, Manja thinks with a feeling of hardness towards him in her heart, which finally made him give in to her, who wished for no more than to waste her career on a few, mostly useless, B.A. subjects.

Through sheer luck, bolstered with the help of one of her teachers, Manja had managed to secure a private bursary which partly covered her

fees, so Oliver Levsky was not in a position to assert complete authority over her.

"A B.A. stands for bugger-all," he had said, his thick moustache wet from a marrowbone which he was sucking. "I am trying to show you that you are making the wrong decision. I can see that you need to find out for yourself the purposelessness of what you are doing." He felt betrayed and ignored, but Manja bore it. "I wash my hands of your decision. You have reached this point on your own."

Oliver is surprisingly positive when, sitting on wire mesh chairs under the largely leafless fruit trees, Manja finally gets around to telling him of her new political activity, as she likes to term it, and modest source of income.

"When they start offering music or woodwork," he says, "I hope you will tell them to call me."

Manja laughs heartily and throws a small, wet ball into the corner of the garden for her father's Jack Russell, Anita. As Anita hurls herself into untidy clumps of brown winter grass, treadmill dust and sand into the air, Oliver says -

"Why do you laugh? Is there no place for me in the arrangements which you and your friends are playing at?"

"We are not playing, Dad," replies Manja, but the irritation which she spontaneously feels at the belittling word, is lost under a thoughtfulness, indeed, a not often wakened interest in her father. Though he is tolerant of her opinions, he himself has thus far only ever displayed a marvellous (basically indefensible) indifference with regard to the injustices that she knows have been partially responsible for their comfortable life during the eighteen years that they have lived in South Africa.

"I did not know you cared about these things," she adds.

"Care?" says Oliver and sighs. He does not seem to notice Anita as she nudges his bare, blond knee repeatedly. When she eventually drops her ball, jumps onto his lap and begins to lick his face he leans back, holds the dog's shoulders in his square hands and looks into her shiny eyes.

"What would I not give," he says, addressing the smiling animal, "if I were paid to teach you, rather than the numbskulls I am enslaved to?" He turns his head and looks at Manja mournfully. His grey-green

moustache seems to be drooping even more than usual. "One walks the difficult path," he says, snickering sadly, "because there is no other." Then he takes the dog in both hands and hoists her roughly over the arm of his rusty chair. Anita utters a yelp, crouches, and disappears with her tail between her legs. Oliver leans forward, grasps his large, earthenware beer-mug, still a third full of his homebrew, and empties it in one, long draught. He wipes his arm across his mouth, gazes at Manja with a yeasty half-smile that makes her want to run a mile and says,

"Shall we play?"

Manja knows how much emotional sustenance Oliver draws from their bi-monthly musical sessions in which she accompanies his tremulous violin on the old rattling piano he has inherited from his mother. He fetches her in the old Volvo on Sunday after lunch and then takes her out for a pizza or falafel in Hillbrow "for fun" in the evenings, before dropping her off again at the communal house. Manja suffers these sessions mainly for her father's sake. Not that she plays against her will, but having no piano of her own on which to practise the duets they tackle, she always feels herself to be at a considerable disadvantage. She is not sufficiently adept at sight-reading to be able to let go into the music; nor is there ever adequate light above the piano against the stained, almost totally bare wall, with Manja having to sit with her back to the only window.

Furthermore - this is perhaps the real source of the strains that the sessions induce in her - Manja cannot but notice the intensity of emotion which the otherwise dreary, droopy man that is her father pours into his playing with her. He positively dances, bends, sways and sometimes even produces dainty hops on his hiker's legs before the wrought metal music stand, while she tries not to see him. Nor does he hold back in telling her how much he enjoys their musical sessions. In the exquisite conversations between the instruments, their melodic give and take and the moments of transition from one key, or one movement, to another, it is to Manja as if these were replacement conversations to Oliver which stand in for human love and communication, of which his life seems largely to be void. For he still waits for Manja's mother, and will wait forever for her to realise at

last the error of her ways. His fiddled retorts to Manja's tapping and pressing the piano keys are the closest the poor man can come to speaking with, indeed imploring, the woman who has betrayed his simple dreams.

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Chapter 4 The Raid

It must have been her father's stories about the looting Russian soldiers after the war, knocking with the knock that does not ask, but commands the door to open - the drumbeat on the commune's front door in the morning is at once unmistakable in its message to Manja: the police are here.

Instinct makes her leap out of bed and snatch from her row of books the few banned ones which she owns, and stash them behind pine cones and Jacaranda pods in the fireplace. Over this she places her only LP: *Death and the Maiden*, a gift from her late godfather. Upon a pink background, the sleeve bears an etching of a young girl with flared nostrils beside a skull.

No sooner has she peeped gingerly through her door, than Willem's rather forced smile appears before her face.

"This is Colonel Whitecross," he says, nodding towards the man, followed by several others who push themselves past Willem and Manja into her room. "They have come here to ask us a few questions. Please co-operate," he instructs his bewildered, nodding housemate, "to help them do their work as quickly as possible."

It must be eight men who tramp three-legged on the wooden floors. Their third legs are their rifles. Four of them have squashed themselves into her room. They smell of cold air, canvas and smoke. It is not an unpleasant smell to her, because it reminds her of tents and bushfires, camping trips with her father. But there is something else, too, which she cannot identify and which makes her sharply feel the cold.

One of the men points the beam of his torch onto her books, slowly, as though he were really reading the words on every spine. Manja congratulates herself on her foresight and is bold, or stupid enough to switch on her light.

"It's only university books," she says breezily.

Two of the men sit down on her bed, on the sheet which must still be warm. They look younger than herself. Smooth-faced, they appear almost lost in their uniforms.

Manja shivers in her old-fashioned (her grandmother's) white cotton nightgown. A policeman pushes past her to peruse the pile of *Rising Suns* and *Heralds* stacked against the wall. As he does so, he brushes

against the backrest of her desk chair, over which her clothes hang in a neat pile. Yesterday's bra and panties fall to the ground. The policeman and Manja look at one another and it seems to her suddenly as if they are children in a game, each one playing his part according to an agreement reached beforehand. The main rule is to keep up the pretence.

"Which newspaper do you find tells the news most accurately?" asks Whitecross, watching the man beside the *Rising Suns*. Whitecross' tone is simultaneously polite and entirely guileless. The *Rising Sun* is a socialist paper containing good articles and reviews on the arts and cultural events, as well as educational articles on history (the Revolutions, rather than the Great Trek) and health, amongst others, with which Manja likes to further her own intellectual development. "The Star," she lies, perfectly matching Whitecross' guileless mien. *The Star* is one of the most widely read liberal dailies in the region. Whitecross gestures towards the *Rising Suns*.

"And that?" he asks, sounding genuinely interested.

"Oh, I sometimes read their arts and culture page," says Manja dismissively. Is Whitecross going to go along with this game? He does not respond to her, but he jots down something in his notebook.

It was a man like this who kneed a comrade in the stomach repeatedly at one of the recent marches on the university campus. Men like these have come here before when she was not home, childishly tearing down Willem's ECC posters and her own print of Steve Biko. Who was it - is he here? - who held a fellow-student by the scruff of his neck and beat him over and over - concentratedly, with immense earnestness almost like love - with his sjambok?

Boys. Young men, such as these. Pink-skinned, blue-eyed, like marzipan figurines. Whitecross himself is older. Puffier and sourer. But not yet over the hill by any means.

Manja is innocent. Even Whitecross can see that. She is a quick sprinter both physically and mentally - nimble, able to anticipate danger. She escapes every rubber bullet, birdshot, the sjamboks and the fists that hurl themselves into her slower - perhaps braver - comrades. And she escapes Whitecross' questions. She does as Willem has advised her to do, co-operating naked and shivering under her nightgown, looking her questioner into his unreachable, faraway eye without searching for or hiding anything.

Thank goodness for Hanno's advice to her not to join MK. How frighteningly boring are the calcified visions and divisions under which these burly people labour.

Still, Whitecross' spirit lingers in the room afterwards, like teargas - cold, flameless burning, suffocating. She stares mutely at the indentations that the policeman's backsides have left in her mattress. She picks up her underwear and just stands as she is with the clothes in her hand, closing the nightgown over her breast with the other.

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"We were raided this morning," she announces to her class of eighty learners that afternoon. She has no doubt that they are all on her side. The revelation causes a shocked and angry murmur to rise from the dark faces in the lecture hall. Some of the girls click their tongues and Manja is aware of several gasps. She receives them all as sympathetic sounds.

"I am feeling shaky," she says loudly, slowly, clearly. (The students' English is elementary.) They are silent. In the next instant they rise, lifting their bags (plastic packets) onto the tables and slinging them over their shoulders. Not all, but a good portion of them are preparing to leave.

"No!" cries Manja in alarm over clicking, thumping seats and rustling pages, "the class is not cancelled. I will still teach you."

There is a moment of complete confusion as some of the students re-seat themselves.

"There is no reason to cancel the class," she shouts. "But I had an idea. I thought: instead of me always speaking to you, you can speak to each other. I said last time that today we would revise the cell. I will write down some questions. It is not a test. It is an opportunity for something different. You can make groups. Answer your questions in your groups."

The students nod. Manja turns her back and begins to write down the questions on the board. After the first, she turns around to examine the silence behind her. The students sit. Not one has opened a book. She is a little surprised, but then she understands. They are disadvantaged. Nothing can be taken for granted. She has to help them reach a point of understanding. Her heart expands at the thought. She commands:

"Open your books. Copy this down."

At once, there is a whirring of sufficient ballpoints and pencils for Manja to feel triumphant. One has to expect that there always are a few students who do not participate. Most of them write on scraps of paper which they seem forever to be borrowing from one or the other student fortunate enough to possess a notebook or writing pad.

Then Manja instructs the students to form groups. She repeats the instructions several times. Group work appears to be a totally new concept to them, but it is, after all, not something with which Manja is familiar in practice either. The seating arrangement in the hall does not make it an easy process. Manja squeezes herself through the students, speaking softly with them as she moves from group to group, sometimes even walking on the tables to get past, much to the amusement of the teenagers.

As she circulates, it becomes obvious to her (not for the first time) that the object of the exercise is not the cell. It is the contact between her and them. She has never been so close to bodies forbidden her in her life before. (Her father's fortnightly maid had always disappeared before Manja returned home from school). She takes in their closeness. Their spicy smell. Their hair. Their shiny skins, their perfumes and smiles. She knows that most of them, too, feel themselves to be closer to her than they have ever been to a person of her race. Some of them get up, press against her, breathe their breath into her face, pretending to discuss the cell even as they gaze themselves into her own vision, watching her mouth, her nose, mesmerised by her sheer presence, or by their perception of it. She knows that this is her private war, their war, which they are winning. A luscious banding together of ordinary people. To ignore the strictures of incomprehensible laws and their three-legged men. To flow like water which reaches the shore on one side as easily as it does that on the other. The self-enclosed, sulky, snapping girl which in other circumstances is a role she often feels condemned to play is here an unknown person from a distant land. Here, she feels at home. She flirts (she is only a few years the students' senior), enunciates the words 'mitochondrion' and 'membrane', face to face, before their own mouths, for their lips and tongues to explore. She herself clicks and lolls her way through their names, practising, making them giggle and mock her, honouring the fascination of all that she does not know.

As she circulates, Manja comes upon a group that includes a tall boy, Obed Shoke, who has a perfectly oval face and enormous, horse-like teeth. He is wearing a policeman's uniform and is, at this moment, lying with his head upon his arms as if he were sleeping - which is probably why she has not noticed him yet today.

The other students in his group sit silently before their empty papers, staring into space. As Manja approaches, they duck together, keeping her in the corner of their eyes and making an altogether poor show of earnest conference.

Manja seats herself on the table before them and says, "Pretend I'm not here. Carry on with your work. Ignore me."

The students - two girls and a boy, apart from Obed - look baffled. Neighbouring students giggle and stare. The people in the group look at one another and begin themselves to smile. They look at Obed and back at Manja. Then they return to their still, silent stances and wait. One girl - Refilwe - wears an embarrassed smile about her large, tense mouth.

Manja decides, after all, to intervene directly.

"Are you not taking part?" she addresses Obed, who lifts his head and blinks sleepily at her.

"I cannot work today," he declares and lies down again.

Manja is annoyed.

"You cannot work today," she echoes, letting her irritation sound.

"I did not sleep last night," replies Obed, more politely this time.

"Why did you not sleep?" asks Manja, adding, "And why are you wearing this uniform?"

"I fight," says Obed in his heavy accent, "I fight to help my people. I like to wear these clothes. It is to fight. I like to wear it is why I wear it." He gazes at her innocently.

A loaded silence takes hold of the students around Obed and Manja. It affects nearby groups as well. She feels uncomfortable with and offended by the uniform. What could be its significance? The silence of the other learners is inaccessible to her. Each keeps his peace. Manja becomes aware of the fact that to her Obed is still a child - too young, at any rate, for a task that requires him to do violence, to wield a weapon. Indeed, is a person ever anything but too young, too full of error, for violent bravery, for the shimmering dark shield asking, life or death? Whose side is Obed on?

"What do you do?" she asks, no longer caring about the academic objectives of the lesson. "How do you protect your people? What do you do?" she repeats.

Obed is slouching against the backrest of his seat. Manja is aware that she dislikes him. At the same time, he is only a child. A horrible

child, but still a child. A victim, she thinks. She plays with her hands, rubs her wristbands, beneath which the skin itches. What is she to do?

"We have guns," says Obed, "but it is natural I can't tell you all those things we do. As I am sure you understand," he says coldly, but not impolitely.

His eyes are the sort whose outer corners droop, giving him a sad look that contrasts horribly with his horsey mouth.

"You shoot people?" says Manja disbelievingly.

"Yes," replies Obed, adding, "it is not good to talk about it, it is not good."

"You have shot people?" persists Manja densely.

"I think it cannot be possible," counters Obed, "for you to understand the situation."

The other students listen and watch. Refilwe's smirk has disappeared. She sits matriarchally, regally even, with her arms folded over her abundant bosom.

"How will you pass your matric," says Manja, trying to get back to her home ground, "when you are doing this - this fighting?"

Sighs of what sound to Manja like irritation are audible. Is Willem right, after all, when he suggests that what Eric (and now her) are doing, though admirable to an extent, is at base completely futile? That really it perpetuates the system?

Refilwe sits like a statue. Unresponsive, irresponsible. She is simply, comfortably, waiting to see what will happen. Manja suddenly feels young, younger than all of them together. Who will help her? She stares into the sea of fathomless faces. 'The system,' she thinks, 'is stronger, it turns us into strangers no matter what we do.' It is hopeless. She cannot reach them, not one of them. What are they thinking?

Then, to her great joy and relief, a small boy, Selby, who sits nearby and who has a childlike face with skin as smooth as caramel, speaks up.

"It is very bad for us, M'am," he says, "we come here, it is the only place to be safe, for us, to can, want to pass the exam."

Selby gazes at her with what seems briefly like compassion.

There is a sudden rustling. The forty-five minute lesson is over. Some students toss their blank pieces of paper into their OK Bazaars packets. Others leave them on the tables as they file out of the

lecture hall, pushing each other forward with their breasts and stomachs.

"Please answer the questions for Thursday!" cries Manja into the tumult, "I want to take in your answers and mark them!" In a trice, the hall is empty. Manja descends the steps and walks over to the blackboard.

'Organelles in cell cytoplasm,' it says overhead. She erases the chalked letters with a trembling hand. 'nelles in cell cytoplasm,' it reads and then, 'oplasm'. Finally, all that remains on the blackboard are fragments, incoherent lines and curls and smudges of chalk until, at length, only a fine layer of white dust offers a clue to the fact that the board might have been covered with any writing at all.

Manja's experiences at P.S.L. continue to be a mixture of extremes. She seesaws between delight over her usefulness, and being utterly downcast - is she truly a being outside her chosen tribe?

She gains experience as a tutor and, in time, as a writer of 'learning materials'. Eric's pragmatic response to the dearth of textbooks among his protégés is to secure sufficient funds for the project to develop their own. Aligning herself totally with Eric's vision, Manja makes herself available to compose a poetry manual in which she includes the learners' own, precious, original utterances - which she has greedily gathered and hoarded in her head - to illustrate a variety of figures of speech.

A year later, coinciding with her Bachelor of Arts (Hons.) qualification, she relinquishes her position as biology tutor and joyfully allows Eric to instate her in the field of English language and literature. Here, she knows, she can be of greater use than before. Has she not struggled thus far precisely because the languages were not the same? To Manja, language is primitive, like music. It is not only the meanings of words and ideas which matter and with which one struggles as a learner. No: it seems to her far more like a physical battle in which her charges are engaged - trying first to ambush, then to embrace unfamiliar sounds with their tongues, gums, lips and teeth. She deliberately wears outrageous clothing and addresses emotive matters in order to provoke the learners to speak with emotion and intention - the spirit behind the word. Not only this, but she tries to provide them with ammunition to defend themselves against the spirit

which in her opinion in trying to undo them all. She encourages them to finish sentences that begin with: 'I want', 'I dream', 'I dislike', 'I think', and so on, compelling them to use exotic vocabulary which she makes them chant over and over, feeling the words like sweets in their mouths until they become songs.

How far she has travelled since Hanno extinguished the brief flame of desire in her to becoming a soldier. This war she is fighting is far quieter, or at any rate more invisible, and more devious - that word again - than if she were formally to don a uniform. This war is, in fact, multiform. She comes passionately to agree with Eric that the tiny, occasional refuge which they provide for the young people - bussing them back and forth between their township and the university premises - plays a modest but indispensable part in eroding the existing régime. A kind of nibbling by numerous mice at the threads of an enclosing and oppressive bodice. She pushes through the necessary information to enable learners hopefully to pass their exams on the same Anglocentric stories and poems in the Hardy and Strutt publications prescribed when she was at school. Now, as then, Hardy and Strutt is the country's major government-serving educational publishing house. She proceeds, however, to expose the classes to delicious, unprescribed literature from all over the world, which she disguises under purposeful language exercises, but which she believes will, if anything, arouse and even ignite deadened or hopeless Third World hearts.

She remains unable to respond constructively to the fact that the students come from and always return to a world of which she has no experience, a world she is unable to accommodate in her consciousness. When a dutiful, melancholic boy named Thabo breaks down and weeps in class on one occasion, because he was raided and bore witness to violent killing in ANC-Inkhatha conflict a few nights before, Manja cannot respond - she is busy fighting away her own tears. How useless she is. Tales come to her from students with family in Natal that the rivers are afloat with dead bodies. She listens, wide-eyed, and continues drilling into 'her' children the magic and power of old and new, of local and foreign writers alike, indoctrinating them, as she believes, with the beauty and freedom that lies in articulate, logical thought. As if the speechless horrors that occur daily, continuously, could never finally reach her at all.

There is no doubt that Manja believes herself to be fighting for a cause - the only cause. Yet she sometimes feels as if she were hovering above it, that she is no more than a mute witness of people who, unlike her, seem for some reason to be destined for real-life soldiership. Why is proper participation denied her?

She watches Eric at work, and for all the admiration which she genuinely feels for him, there is something about him that seems unreal. It is as if his self-possession concealed something; no, as if it completely obliterated something else. What? Does Eric ever feel pain? To Manja, it is as if his flawless covering somehow swaddles him to the point of imperviousness - like Siegfried's skin made from the hard translucent coating of a dragon's blood.

And she? She works for, with, Eric, does she not?

Whatever may be the secret of Eric's strength, Manja stands in awe of the truly courageous. Eric's and her own path is easy, after all, by comparison with those who really suffer to bring about a new order, the one which everybody dreams will bring justice and equality to all.

Willem's new girlfriend is an example.

Her name is Gila Fox. When she moves into the commune she asks everyone whether or not they will mind if she hangs a picture of her mother in Palestinian traditional dress over the archway in the entrance hall.

Nobody minds, the picture is in fact rather beautiful and Manja feels that it lends the house a feeling both of authority and mystery.

Gila fascinates Manja. She is no less plain than Manja, if that is possible, with small, flat, extraordinarily wrinkled hands. The palm of a person destined to suffer? How else is the frantic criss-crossing of lines upon lines to be explained? What is worse, whenever Gila is stressed, which she often is, she suffers from a peculiar fungal reaction which causes the skin on her hands to peel and flake noticeably.

Manja knows that to grow up motherless is cause for a certain, necessary grimness in oneself. She feels completely unable, however, to imagine what it must be like to lose one's mother to illness, tending her as Gila did for five years before she was finally delivered. When her mother let go, Gila was eighteen years old and the experience seems to have made her oppressively melancholic. There are hints that she is

darkly busy with dangerous anti-apartheid work, at great cost to herself; but when Manja greets her in the passage as they pass one another going to or from the bathroom in the mornings, Gila always seems so humble as to be virtually invisible.

Certainly, although they are of an age, Gila is the older, the wiser, the more experienced of the two. Thus it is that when Gila cooks, Manja must clean up afterwards. She sees no way of changing her lowly place in the ranks. For sure there is Slavic - slaves' blood running in her veins, a peasant's dimness and grouchy acceptance of her plight. This rankles in Manja, even as she helplessly admires Gila, and she continues to blame Willem for her domestic serfhood.

Gila's thoughts and opinions are as complicated as the lines upon her hands. Manja is aware that here is a considerable intelligence - one that might provide answers to the terrible questions which one has to ask if one lives in this country. But the small voice and the thin lips that seem too shy to open sufficiently as to sound a single phrase with confidence always obscure the meaning. It does not occur to Manja to ask whether or not Gila is as proud of herself as Manja assumes she must be. Nearly everybody is superior to her, silly Manja, who knows nothing at all about life. In time, Manja discovers that her awe is more than tinged with fear of this tiny, elusive, brown mousey woman for whom there seems to be no pleasure in life.

When Gila falls pregnant, Manja becomes even more alienated. It is as if the pregnancy ominously enhances Gila's unsmiling power. She seems to Manja the most unmaternal, ungenerous woman she has ever encountered.

In the fourth month of her pregnancy Gila is arrested, and routinely detained without trial, for her involvement with the Communist Party. The Security Police come on Friday afternoon, when she is alone and has just taken the kitke out of the oven. It stands untouched on the rack in the middle of the table for the entire weekend.

Gila's detention ushers in some of the darkest hours in the life of the commune. Willem becomes supremely irritable with Manja, whose defencelessness reaches a peak. A loneliness of terrible expansiveness takes hold of her. She tries to assuage it by eating. She can, now, consume half a dozen cheap buns one after the other, followed by a glass of red chillies which she gobbles one by one, feeling the pungent vegetable sear her mouth, nose and throat. Then she gets sick. At

first, this happens naturally, but soon she learns to bring it about. In this way, she loses so much weight that her father asks after her health on several occasions. Her long hair becomes wispy, her skin dry. She accuses herself of self-indulgence, knowing that her problems are simply signs of bourgeois neurosis. She is not a heroine. There is nothing she can do to help the downtrodden and the oppressed, to help bring about a better world. Yet it gives her strength, of a sort, to speak to her students even while she must bite into herself to hide the pain in her throat where her finger has chafed the membranes raw, and burning acid has intensified the wound. She is ill, she tells herself, but will not, cannot, expect help or sympathy from anybody - because she is white, because she is irrelevant, because she has no right to be in this world.

It takes a while before she is able to articulate the truth to herself that, in fact, she longs to suffer. She yearns, yes, for experience of the kind that Gila is being made to bear - because the only alternative, as it seems to Manja, is to become hard - to cut oneself off, to ignore the pain and suffering of others. She is no Eric, who seems to operate compassionately without damage to himself. She despises the celebratory attitude towards the endurance and survival spirit of the human being. Does she wish to survive this? No. Not ever.

As autumn descends once again into winter with its nasty icy nights, Oliver Levsky presents his daughter with a birthday gift which, Manja begins to believe, is now in all likelihood saving her life.

It is a cassette with a recording of a string quintet. On the cover is an image of birch trees bending over their reflections in a woodland stream. Manja plays the cassette repeatedly, night after night, the crackling radio-and-cassette-player on the floor beside her.

Her eyes close and the music opens and instantaneously pours balm upon the angry ache in her heart. She is transported into an oblivious space during such moments, as if she is already an evaporated being, entirely forgetful of the newspapers which she reads carefully each evening with their articles from hell.

It is this music that forever clarifies matters between Hanno and Manja. Hanno cannot bear classical music. He tells her so, in an emotionally laden voice, as if he were asking to be pitied.

Hanno has recently begun work for the Labour Monitoring Group and is on a daily basis recording the latest in an endless flow of detainees from the proletariat.

"Their names fly by me," he whines, sitting on Manja's bed where she is lying down, "like pollen!" he bursts out - "pollen in the wind! Where do they take them all? They disappear as if the wind were blowing them away!" He buries his face in his hands.

On the third day he comes home, knocks at her door, walks straight into the room without waiting for a reply and commands,

"Switch off that music! Switch it off!"

Hastily, Manja turns down the volume.

"I've given up," says Hanno, "I can't do this work anymore. It is too much to bear."

"Oh," says Manja. Why can't she listen to her music?

Hanno rises and leaves. She hears him close the door of his room. After several minutes he goes out of the front door and drives off. Manja relaxes. She rewinds the tape and presses 'play'.

It is not possible, she thinks, for a person of Hanno's sensitivity to dislike this - which is on a daily basis bringing her back from the brink of despair. She is brought to tears under the influence of the sorrowful Adagio in her cherished quintet, in the middle of which the

syncopated rhythms of the various strings and their struggle to converse constructively - a struggle which persists in the subsequent movements - seems to her a more accurate embodiment of the truth than she has anywhere else yet encountered. The instruments are equal. They assist even where they resist one another as each strives to voice itself. They suffer and celebrate together, with and against one another forever. What choice, after all, do they have?

One day she is bold enough to place the cassette into Willem's recorder in the kitchen, while she does the dishes. Hanno comes home, walks in and cries immediately,

"That is so depressing! How can anybody bear to listen to all that wailing and whining?"

Manja stares at him. How little Hanno comprehends her. They are strangers to one another, each inhabiting a distant land. She is utterly incapable of accepting his point of view. She dries her hands and removes the tape.

"I'm sorry," Hanno says now, "I'm so tense. Gila has been released."

Manja, who has returned to the sink, swings round.

"Oh! That is wonderful!" she cries.

Hanno is strangely downcast. He seats himself.

"Gila has had a very hard time," he chirrups.

'He can't help his voice,' thinks Manja, 'he should never speak. Hanno should only ever sing.'

"She is going to need a great deal of help," continues Hanno, "she is a little girl with a baby inside her body who has been made to see things which nobody should see."

"Gila a little girl!" exclaims Manja. "What? Are you saying they've broken her? She is no longer strong?" she says, full of foreboding.

Hanno gazes at her and chuckles without joy at her naïveté.

"No," he says, "Gila is not strong. Not now, anyway. She has hardly eaten and has not spoken in five months! The baby is due, Manja, in two weeks' time. That is why they released her, I suppose. Who knows what the foetus has suffered already? It is all too horrible to contemplate. She will need privacy. She won't want us around."

Hanno has risen. His one hand lies irresolutely on the table, the other simply hangs. The hands taper at the fingertips, appearing to be almost boneless. 'Mona Lisa hands,' thinks Manja. She lets out the water,

wipes the sink and the table surface as Hanno steps aside. He watches her rinse the dishcloth and finally removing her apron.

"Will you come and sit with me for a little while?" he asks.

She nods, follows him, seats herself on his mattress on the floor behind the door.

Hanno is about to settle himself, but he stops, stares at Manja - "Wait there!" - and rushes outside. He returns with a salmon-pink rose, plucked from the creeper which blooms outside his window.

"For the most beautiful woman I know," he says.

Manja snorts, but she takes the exquisite flower and puts her face to it. Its petals are warm from the sun.

"There has to be a change," says Hanno, settling himself with his back against the brown mark on the wall. "I have to leave the commune."

Manja looks up. He sighs.

"What is my life?" he squeaks, "I mean, look at this." He sits up and gestures round the empty room. "I have nothing. I am thirty-five and what have I to show for it? Other men have - well, they are settled. Children, wife, house. Is that what I want? I keep moving. That's who I am. It's all a game, Manja. Who am I? When I predict a winning horse, you know what I am doing? I yield. To what? Chance? Destiny? There is an unknown player. What don't we know? Spell 'unknown' with a capital U." He looks at her meaningfully without blinking. "I am a pawn. We all are pawns. If there is someone up there, he's a joker. I choose to be a pawn and I know - I know I am a prophet." Hanno's voice somersaults over itself. "Why should I be ashamed of that?" He stares at her, his light eyes orbiting. "You don't understand," he then says resignedly, "do you?"

Manja turns from the rose to face him.

"No," he insists, "you're too safe. You haven't seen what it means not to be like everybody else. I am different," he says, "I know I am. I wouldn't want it any other way. It doesn't make life easy."

"I used to feel different," retorts Manja, "but my father was ferocious when I told him. He scolded me no end over it. He scalded me, actually." She stares into the folds of petal. "He taught me not to think I am better than anybody else," she continues, "it's wrong. That's why there is apartheid and other evils - because of people who think they are better than others."

Hanno is silent. "Yes," he says then. "But that is not what I mean. Is different automatically better? Why is it wrong to be better? I can't explain it."

He gazes at her and she feels his eyes stroke her all over, her hair in a knot behind her neck, her shoulders, her back, and her hands around the rose. She returns his gaze.

"I am sad that you are leaving," she admits.

"I was hardly ever here," he replies coyly and shifts uncomfortably.

"No more jam sessions," she says, staring at the guitar that stands up against the torn upholstery of the only chair in the room. "Where will you go?" she asks.

"I don't know. I'll find somewhere." He seems distracted and nervous.

"I just need somewhere to put my mattress, that is all."

He bends forward, takes the rose out of her hands and reaches for her ear. She shakes her head at once so that the flower falls.

"Don't do that," she says, "I don't like it."

"Why not?" says Hanno, raising his fair eyebrows so that his huge, transparent eyes seem even bigger, "it suits you. Go on. Be a dare."

He sounds impatient. Impatient with her obtuseness, her stubborn recalcitrance and passivity. But she cannot help herself and nor can he.

"I don't want flowers in my hair," she says, almost adding, 'I am not a woman.' But she checks herself and in that instant knows that the opportunity, or whatever it was, has passed. Forever. She gets up with a heavy heart and leaves him with his rose.

When Willem brings Gila home, Manja is once again lying trance-like on her bed while the quintet rattles in her machine. She has just turned it over for the rather sharp-tongued Scherzo which, the moment it starts, she knows is the most inappropriate welcome home music imaginable. Could there really be a Joker like Hanno said? Manja does not want Gila to hear the violent (are they joyful or simply frantic?) leaps of the strings up and down the scale. When she feels the vibrations of steps coming down the passageway and somebody closes the bathroom door, Manja has no doubt that it is Gila. Her heart beats loudly as she turns the volume-button down. She waits for the sound of flushing and for the strangely slow, heavy steps to plod back past her door. Are they in the kitchen or in their room?

When Manja peers timidly around the kitchen entranceway, Willem, Gila and a woman whom Manja has not seen before are laughing quietly about something that sounds as if it has to do with Gila being under house arrest. Gila is shockingly unchanged. She has lost colour though, so that her brown skin looks grey, and there is a puffiness about her face. She is the first to spot Manja. Manja is not sure whether or not she ought to embrace Gila and is thankful when Gila remains seated and merely mutters a small "Hello," together with a grey semi-smile.

Willem introduces the petite, slightly older woman sitting beside Gila as her sister Danielle. He is full of cheer, which Manja finds as childish and repugnant as ever, even hurtful under the circumstances. "The Revolution has begun! Amandla!" he bawls, lifting his coffee cup. He actually touches Gila's belly with it. "Here's to the unborn soldier, citizen of a new era."

The sisters are completely accepting of and even seem amused by his unselfconscious antics. Manja tries to tell herself that she is being unjust, but remove her feelings she cannot. To top it all, Willem fetches some papers from his room and reads out several poems which he has written in Gila's absence. One of them is in Afrikaans and deals with his imminent fatherhood. Since Gila's Afrikaans is poor and Danielle's non-existent, Manja is instructed to translate his words as he reads. Despite everything, she attempts this task in good faith. Willem's writing is, after all, the best part of him.

There are no crude slogans, as they recur without end in his speech, but as the poem progresses, the fist in Manja's heart tightens: they all live inside the Darkest Age. It is:

A father who cannot,
shall not, switch lights on now.
My house is blind,
I swim with you,
still gilled within original Darkness (*oorspronklike
Duisternis*)

Is Mother Eden,
whence we derive?
No - motherfatherchild (*Mapakind*) are curled
inside God's pouch from which -
I know it now -
He ungirds Himself (*Hy los die gord*) -
we are uncertain -
are we dropped or hurled (*uitgesmyt*) -
but we know one thing:
we are too heavy for Him to carry (*te swaar vir Hom
om ons te dra*)...

We carry you,
She carries (*Sy dra, sy dra*)
Mapakind in Ma.

As her English voice echoes Willem's Afrikaans on these terrible lines (how can he burden Gila so?), Manja watches the pregnant woman who sits, wearing her half-smile, rubbing her wrinkled, flaking little hands again and again over her neat bulge, looking deadly tired.

At the end of the month, Manja takes Hanno's hint and leaves Gila and Willem to themselves in the big house. Their baby is a doll-sized, blood-pink boy whom they name Karl. Initially Gila stays at her sister's place, but now she is returned to create her own regimen - entirely according to the infant's incessant dictates. It makes for a bizarre and emotionally far too laden show to see both mother and father being torn asunder, as it seems to Manja, by this awful, skinny and profoundly discontented newling.

Manja's new abode is a bright, airy room in an apartment which she shares with a gigantic, gruff man who takes possession of her in a largely brotherly manner. Thus, she feels both protected and free to continue exploring her world in her way. For, much to her father's chagrin, a normal woman's desire for stability and security seems to have escaped Manja. She is showing no signs of wishing to gain a firm footing at P.S.L., even though this would surely not be impossible for her to do.

"If I were promoted, I could no longer be with the students," she tells Eric when he mentions that she stands chances of 'ascent' in position. "You can't stay a tutor forever!" replies Eric in a perplexed tone, "you have to think what you would like to do with your future." Manja stares at him. The word 'future' reads like a blank to her. Surely the future arrives of its own accord? Thus far, certainly, it always has.

"Don't you have any plans?" asks Eric. The phone rings beside him. He lifts the receiver, presses a button, replaces the receiver and gazes indulgently at Manja, who clears her throat.

"We must fight Apartheid," she says hesitantly. She is being put on the spot. "I want to be among these children. They are teaching me so much. I can't think beyond that!" she says defensively.

"Well, if you're happy where you are ... "

"Oh, I am," replies Manja. She takes her leave from the dank office in which her trusted friend spends every day of the working week without fail. She walks everywhere she needs to get to, for she has neither money, nor the patience required, for public transport. Besides, walking grounds her - much more, surely, than a regular income or a worldly position ever could. It does not occur to her to question what seems to be an innate need in her very body for constant movement. The mere thought of being obliged always to return to an identical office in the name of her employment is enough to induce physical sensations of panic in her breast, accompanied by powerful fugitive impulses. She does not, indeed cannot, speak to anybody about this state of affairs, for the simple reason that it is the most natural thing in the world. She is irritated by Eric's repeated offers to lift her home in his car. That he should claim to lack the time to walk with her is his choice. Manja has time. It is the only thing a person can really be said to have that is powerful, is it not? She has no wish to exchange it - for

anything. Her time on earth. The day. Today. The heart is a clock and what choice does one have but to move with its relentless, though not eternal, beat? As the months pass by, she encounters numerous people, bears witness to a great variety of events; and enjoys accidental meetings that enable her, finally, to distinguish between the many gestures and words that pass between human beings in and upon the streets on a daily as well as nightly basis. She has, alas, not recourse to convincing argument in answer to her father's and Eric's persistent wonderment at, even annoyance with her 'lack of direction'. The words, 'What does it mean to be a human being? Who are we? Who am I?' - though these might well describe the object of her yearning and explain her daily actions - are not nearly sufficiently material in their rewards to satisfy the skeptics. Nor does Manja's total contentment with her hand-to-mouth existence persuade her questioners that she may have a point. What can she do but secretly shake them off as she goes on her way?

One evening, as she comes home, she notices Theresa, who works in The Hatch, an apartment block very near to Manja's. Theresa is fat and pretty. Her voice is silvery, melodious. She has returned after a short time of absence and appears to be less explosively fat. Manja greets and asks carefully, yet inquisitively,

"Did you have a baby?"

Theresa looks at her in the purple dusk. "Yes. A boy," she smiles. She stands there glowing, immensely proud and happy. Manja is awestruck, not impervious to the mother's joy. Perhaps the brief, shared stillness is what makes Theresa say,

"Do you want to see him?"

"Yes, yes, I do!" Manja replies at once.

The tin door leads to a passageway of dustbins and they file through to Theresa's little room. Quietly, she opens the door.

"He was born two weeks ago," she says.

On an enormous double bed that fills almost the entire room, there lies a child no larger than a shoe. He just about fits into one of the squares on the king-size blanket. Wrapped up as he is, Manja can see only his face, lit up by the pride and love that Theresa oozes out onto him. All unformed, still, dented like a soft clay ball broken only by two dark lines of sleeping eyes, two tiny holes for nostrils

and a slightly darker, heart-shaped patch which bubbles a little against a fist the texture of liver.

Theresa stands over him like an enormous setting sun and throws gold light all around her baby. The light seems to warm him and he wriggles slowly somewhere in the bed of his awakening muscles.

Manja gazes at him for a long time, lying there between the Sta Soft and the chicken for supper, the dishcloths and tubs - all that lines the walls surrounding his bed. He lies in it like a button in a lounge suite, a flower's centre that makes the very tips of her petals tremble.

Theresa's body flows back towards the door and Manja has to follow her. How different is this scene from the unhappy family in Bellevue East. Is Theresa blessed with ignorance or knowledge? From where comes her peace? From where her quiet certainty? The street is now deep blue. As Manja waves good-bye, she senses that she is leaving behind her not a woman, but a shy black buffalo on the pavement, whose mighty presence expresses nothing if not a great, nourishing loyalty to herself in all her bodiedness.

Henceforth, whenever Manja greets the woman, she feels face to face with a large, wet-lipped goddess of sorts. In this way, Manja becomes aware, even if admittedly in only a rather dim manner, that the world of material phenomena is not nearly as steady as might be supposed. More and more insistently does the conviction take hold in the coiled innards both of her belly and her head that the distance between what is human and what is animal; between what is animate and what is inanimate; finally even between what is and what is not - that these distances are incidental and in truth immeasurable.

As Manja goes on her way, proceeding from crossroad to crossroad, the civil servant in the blue dress, carrying a briefcase, tottering on high heels in front of Manja, changes without warning into a giraffe. It gasps for breath through its strange snout as a passing bus pushes her narrow, flecked body against a wall edging the sidewalk. The wall, deeply flushed, retreats, leaving the giraffe to regain her equilibrium on her own, re-assembling her wispy womanhood in fluttering steps on the tar. The bus farts off in roaring celebration of itself, the wall returns to its burgundy brooding and the blue form dissolves into nothing at all around the corner.

It does not occur to Manja to question these arbitrary visions. When she mentions them to her friends, she does so in a manner that elicits mainly laughter, which seems a fair response. She accepts that to others they are 'drug trips', that she should be humoured like a child. But the experience that phenomena - such as woman and giraffe - can and do transform into one another, travelling through various phases of materialisation without requiring human notice - this settles into an ever richer sediment at the core of her consciousness. She cannot deny that the incessant interplay between herself, and what she perceives, is her primary, perhaps even her exclusive concern, but justify it, alas, she cannot, for it boils down to a terrible fascination with the least visible and most unimportant things in the world - to the extent that she could be accused of spinning about herself in blithe oblivion to all moral responsibilities.

University of Cape Town

Word has reached Manja that Gila and Willem are battling. Apparently their child is not quite right. She has not connected with them in a long time and ought to visit them. That is the proper thing to do, is it not? She does not wish to be callous or forgetful.

She jumps nimbly up the stone steps of the old house, which, as far as she knows, they still inhabit. There on the stoep stands a strange structure she has not seen before, on metal legs, with a torso made from driftwood, pointed at one end like a snout. Two red glass beads give the structure an animated sense of vision. Manja shudders. It is just like Willem to decorate the entrance to his house like this. The structure has probably been made by some poor soul whom Willem is endeavouring to uplift. She wonders - not without glee - who is now doing his housework. It cannot be Gila, surely.

As Manja turns from the form on her left, her eye catches an even more off-putting wall sculpture to the right of the door, which is open as usual. What the sculpture might be made of it is impossible for Manja to determine, but what impresses her despite herself are the fine, insect-like stripes that wind themselves in blues and blacks and greens about a convex base. This ultimately and, Manja has to admit, artfully creates the effect of a grimacing face. The mask's forehead is taped over helmet-like, and its eyes are spitefully concealed beneath a strip of dark blue plastic. The object is somehow set in a wooden case that might once have been a drawer, like a face emerging from a dungeon. It is absolutely hideous.

Manja looks about her. Willem's wicker chair with its filthy cushion stands a little way off, so he must still live here. Does she really want to visit now?

At that moment, Manja realises that she is being watched. Standing in the doorway is a man. He is naked except for what looks like a loincloth. His hair is long and greyish-brown. Bushveld-coloured, she thinks. In fact, in the few seconds it takes Manja to size the man up, he becomes to her altogether like a shrub that has been pulled out, roots and all, somewhere in the dry veld that reigns (and will reign forever) outside the city's circumference.

"Hello," says the stranger in an unmistakable accent and smiles as though he has secrets that positively tickle him. Manja cannot make out

his baboon-like eyes, exceedingly close- as well as deep-set as they are under the shadow of his shrubby brow. His chest is winged with hair. The nipples on the outer edges are dark pink.

"I used to live here," she replies. "Are Willem or Gila home?"

"Come in," says the bush-man. His tongue seems to tread on every crisp, English sound with a slow, reptilian thud. There is something archaic and soundless in his aura that fascinates Manja. As his willowy, snake-like torso turns, she catches a glimpse of the stranger's penis swinging loosely beneath the loincloth. Manja's heart contracts fearfully. What is this being? His smell enters her nostrils. It takes her into the veld. He smells of noonday grass, of sour ants, of sandy soil and bokdrolletjies.

As she crosses the threshold into the house, Manja is vaguely aware that Gila's Palestinian mother-goddess still guards the entranceway overhead. Her attention is at once usurped, however, by a startling vision of numerous paintings jostling one another for space, edge to edge on what must have been every empty bit of wall available in the front hall and corridor. Although the paintings bear a variety of subjects, the overall impression on Manja in her first state of shock is of a largely green universe, consisting in a veritable soup of spirals, asterisks and comets. Upon, between, above and below these she finds a favourite theme: vertical praying mantises with pendulous breasts and almost equally pendulous labia that protrude pincer-like from each variegated abdomen.

As Manja stares speechlessly into the depths of this artificial world by whose authority she is carried far beyond the mere reality of canvas and paint, the stranger places a wiry hand upon her shoulder blade and ushers her into the kitchen.

There, upon the old, dirty table sits naked the baby Karl. Having struggled forth from his infantility, he is now typically rounded and become what people supposedly term cute. He is at this moment, with his dimpled fingers, pressing a lid onto a plastic container. Gila sits in the corner, seeming half to watch him and half to read a book of recipes. She looks as shrunken as ever, diminished both by the dimness of the kitchen, as well as by a Picasso pigeon painting that has replaced Willem's ECC poster taken by the police. A spiralled Kudu horn is newly hung not far from it upon the same wall.

When Karl notices Manja and her lank, bushy escort, he drops the lid and stares at them with such a knowing gaze that Manja feels the hair at the back of her neck stand on end. Gila looks up from her reading. "Manja!" she says.

It is the most animated tone that Manja has ever known her to produce. She steps forward, smiles and greets Gila. Though she feels an impulse in her body to demonstrate a warmth that she does, in fact, possess in relation to this puzzling, low-key woman, shyness holds her coolly back. Indeed, she does not even meet Gila's eyes. She immediately regrets it, for Gila resumes her ungiven, dusty earth expression at once.

"Sit down," says the stranger and again his grip directs Manja in no uncertain terms. "This calls for a drink, how about it," he says, without employing the questioning intonation demanded by the words. Even more strongly than before it seems to Manja that his speech is footprints, primitive spoor, visible rather than reverberant.

Gila introduces him as Jolanus de Jager and as he pours wine into three smutty-looking, scratched plastic tumblers it is revealed to Manja that his are the hands and the spirit behind the art that now dominates the house. Indeed, the signature on all the paintings, Manja notes, is a handsomely drawn JdJ.

"Did you," Manja dares to ask timidly, "also create the sculptures on the stoep?"

Jolanus appears highly amused. Is it her cautious reserve? She feels uncomfortably exposed.

"The one on the wall is Zelda the Welder," says Jolanus, giggling. It sounds as if a large lizard were suddenly opening its ruff.

"Willem and I bought Jolanus' warthog," Gila chimes in, evidently referring to the red-eyed piece of driftwood on stilts, "we think it's beautiful."

"Oh," says Manja, looking at her wine. "I probably need to look at everything again," she adds, "I think I need to get used to it."

She is, in fact, tensely trying to control the extent to which Jolanus' basically naked figure distracts her. When he fills her tumbler for the second time, however, she finds that he makes her less anxious than before. The smell of the wine goes well with his general bushveld odour. He sits close beside her, such that his downy arm touches hers, and when she moves away, he lifts the arm and exudes such an

overpowering smell of fresh sweat that it takes Manja several seconds before she notices that Jolanus is actually playing with her hair. "Don't mind him," says Gila, noticing Manja's bewilderment, "he does that to me all the time." Her eyes crinkle and for a fraction of a second Manja actually glimpses a sparkle. "Jolanus is good for us," continues Gila, looking serious once more, "isn't he?" she says, addressing her child.

Karl is playing with the bottle of wine; taking its lid and neck into his mouth as far as it will go (horribly far, thinks Manja, who is too timid to interfere) and swigging his head back as if he were drinking. Then he tries in vain, but with a perseverance that Manja finds agonising, to unscrew the lid with his fingers which unfortunately keep splaying most unsuitably.

At length, Gila rises and pours some milk into a bottle which she hands to Karl. As she takes the wine flask from him, however, Karl issues an abrupt bloodcurdling scream. For a moment, Gila stands absolutely still before him. Her face looks deathly. Then she drops the milk bottle on the floor as if she had forgotten she were holding it, sinks back down onto the bench and receives the child who clambers, seemingly panic-stricken, upon her. She sits; stroking her eerie, gnome-like hands over and over Karl's back. The slight movements of her lips suggest that she is speaking, but nothing can be heard over the child's shrill caterwauling. Manja gets up and picks the bottle off the floor, involuntarily covering her ear with her free hand. Jolanus, however, jumps onto the table with his bare feet (Manja cannot help feeling glad that she no longer eats here) and all parts of his maleness leaping. He reaches over Gila and the child and unhooks the Kudu horn beside Picasso's flutter of birds. He jumps down, sits and blows.

The lowing sounds drive themselves powerfully into the marrow, soon silencing Karl who hangs, whimpering, from Gila's neck. Her head bends to nuzzle the child's nape. She caresses him continuously up and down his back.

"Oh, Manja," she says, "It has been so difficult. He would not eat," she continues, "he did not drink. He did not grow. He almost died."

It is not shock, nor even pain, which Manja feels on hearing this dark news from Gila's recent past. On the contrary, a surprised excitement stirs within her. There is a faint warmth coming from Gila, for the

first time ever. A beauty that has slept for one hundred years which, having suffered the kiss of pure despair, now edges forward? No woman has ever confided the least thing in Manja and now this hopeless, depressed, small quiet brown one does.

"Even now," moans Gila, "he eats only milk rice cereal which I have to dilute. I should not speak like this in front of him," she says, but continues, "His development is not normal. He never gurgled, he never babbled."

The child gazes at his mother silently, intently. Whether he should or should not hear her words is not the question. He hears. As does Manja. "He has not formed syllables, there is no hint of words. He will not speak. He will not," says Gila. Her voice becomes stronger than Manja has ever heard it sound.

"I don't even bother to ask anymore," says Gila, gulping down a huge sip of wine and grimacing sourly, "what sets off this kind of thing you saw just now. You wouldn't believe what we have been through.

Psychologists, psychiatrists, paediatricians. Each one has something to say." She pauses, stares at Karl's crown. When she looks up at Manja again there is water in her olive-brown eyes. A tear bulges out and drops. Gila wipes its glistening trace away with her creviced hand. Her child is entirely calm. Gila's mouth tightens. "Some have said he is autistic," she hisses between her teeth, "I have been told I am a neurotic mother. I am the one who creates his problems."

She looks directly into Karl's face and he looks directly back at her. Neither smiles. There is a bond like metal, welded.

"There is nothing wrong with him," says Gila quietly, her voice as dense as steel. "He screams. That is the only way in which he will communicate. He will not eat. He will not sleep. It has -." She hesitates, and then goes on, "Sometimes I've wondered whether Willem and I will survive this. Karl understands, I know he does. More than he should, I suppose."

Gila strokes briefly, compassionately over Karl's head of hair. It is the gentlest colour, like very milky coffee. With tears still glinting in his eyes and his cheeks flushed, he looks angelic. From under Gila's arm he gazes at Jolanus, who is not listening at all to Gila, but is trying to attract Karl's attention by clapping his hands and spinning his twig-like fingers. The child does not smile, but his eyes reveal a certain captivation.

"Why should the mother be blamed for everything?" says Gila, "nobody seems to question that. It is different for the man. Willem suffers through me. But my first connection is to -." She buries her nose in the child's hair, stays there for a moment, then lifts her head again. "Maybe it is all my fault," she says. "But you know, Manja," she continues, "When I was detained, I couldn't sleep or eat. I did not speak. Even now, I can't sleep unless I take pills. It took me months," she says, "before I could speak like a normal person again."

Gila's voice is becoming softer. Manja strains to hear her.

"Perhaps that is why," whispers Gila, "Karl doesn't speak. I failed him in these first months of his life. I wasn't normal. I was ill. I've been told he should have caught up by now whatever the case." She smiles her sad half-smile. "I have seen a world, Manja. Those doctors. They really deserve a critique."

Manja scratches her wrists, which feel itchy, absent-mindedly. Gila's revelation has hit her like a thunderbolt.

"But it's obvious!" she cries almost boisterously, "that your pregnancy affected him. That's clearly got everything to do with what you've been talking about."

Karl has slid off Gila's lap and is gazing unblinkingly at Jolanus who is doing a peek-a-boo routine.

Gila is unmoved. "Yes," she says, her eyes briefly skimming over Manja. She says no more. Sleeping Beauty has gone back to bed behind her hedge of thorns. What does she dream there, tucked up tight in solitude? What does she hope for by continually dragging Karl and herself from unsympathetic doctor to doctor? Compassion? Aid? Is she using her child, herself, as a sign? An accusation? - 'Look what you have done!'

Gila gazes at her hands in her lap like two dead mice. 'No,' thinks Manja, 'she does not accuse, she bears it.' Perhaps she wants her life to be unbearable. Maybe she wants to drive everything, herself, her child, beyond endurance. Maybe she believes that that is what is required in order to bring about a better world. Gila's face has closed again and causes Manja to retract herself.

Karl climbs onto his mother's lap and she wraps her arms about him absent-mindedly. Her eyes are riveted on the distance.

Manja stares at the pair. What a terrible, helpless unity is a mother's undividedness from life. No matter how distorted that life ...

Chapter 10 The Rain-Caller

Several days after her first encounter with Jolanus, Manja visits the old commune again. She ends up full of red wine in front of the newly operative fireplace in Hanno's former room which has been turned into a lounge. Jolanus keeps putting on more wood, even though a balmy breeze is coming in through the windows, which are all open. Manja runs her fingers through the strips of cotton cloth - the 'dress' of one of Jolanus' many original creations - a 'hammerhead doll'. The doll is simply a rectangular block of wood upon a short broomstick, around which hang strips of fabric, like a skirt. Into the block-face, Jolanus has gouged holes, filling them with two translucent pieces of green stone for eyes. The mouthpiece is a metallic platelet with a hole. The puppet's face is black, splattered with gold, like beauty spots.

"I love this doll," says Manja.

"You can have it," says Jolanus.

"That's not what I meant."

"If you like it," replies Jolanus, "it is yours."

Manja presses the thin, hard broomstick with its ragged ribbons against her breast and smiles. "I do like it," she says, "very much. Thank you."

She stays for supper and Jolanus serves several ready-cooked beetroots with salted yoghurt, pepper and lemon juice. He makes much of the sensuousness of the pink mush on their plates. How open he is, like an animal or child, completely uninhibited. She swigs her food down with more wine and begins to feel lighter, as if she could dance now without caring. Jolanus moves closer towards her, reaches firmly for her hand and dips the fingers into his wine.

"You must wash your hands," he says, "after a meal."

She is taken aback and laughs. He puts her hand into his mouth and sucks her fingers. He tries to make her do the same with his hand, but she will not. He dries his fingers on Hammerhead's dress, then caresses Manja's arm. She has not known a man to be so unencumbered by his desire, nor indeed so friendly. She sees grass undulating in the wind and gives herself over to the vision. Jolanus carries her in his branch-like arms down the passage-way to her former room, which he now occupies, and continues to share his pleasure with her freely, plainly, open as the veld, lung-full of space and fresh breath. When he is

emptied, he falls down beside her on the mat that serves as his bed and puts the strands of her hair behind her ears one by one. The wine has stained his mouth as if by berries. Manja is conscious that he loves her indifferently - no more and no less than he loves every woman with whom he shares himself - and this fills her with such intense joy that she remains radiant - contagiously radiant - for the whole of the following day.

There are many men in whom a being such as Jolanus inspires fear and suspicion. His ease with women, his anteatater shyness and slowness around his strange creations and, not least, his unashamed superstitions and belief in all kinds of 'nonsense ideas' - in short, his total failure to conform to expectations of what an 'acceptable' person may be - these are all taken as good reasons to exercise great caution with such a man. Manja's flat mate, Cobus, chooses to follow this route. He comes into Manja's room as she is jotting down last-minute preparations for a class and packing her bag.

"Please," he says, standing in the doorway, "I want to ask you something. Can your magician friend rather not come here?"

Manja slides her lesson plan into her bag and latches it. She frowns inquiringly.

"I don't believe," says Cobus, "that he can really do me harm. But I'd rather not take risks."

"Why?" says Manja, unable to comprehend Cobus, who is in most respects a rational man.

"No," replies Cobus, grinning sheepishly. He begins to stutter. "Youyou never know, you never know. He might make a voodoo doll of me and stick pins into it!"

He is genuinely afraid.

"He can't talk," Manja tries to explain, "You are articulate, Cobus, you are good with language. Jolanus doesn't really have words. That is why he speaks so strangely."

"But look at what he does!" replies Cobus, "all those weird sculptures and pictures I don't understand. This thing -" he points at the little mobile hanging over Manja's bookshelf. It is an arrangement of shell and bone.

Manja nods. "It's a rain-caller," she says.

Cobus laughs a squeezed laugh. "You can't tell me you believe it! I mean - you are - you are amenable to lolologic!"

"He uses the bones of cattle which have died in the drought," explains Manja, "and connects them to shells as a reminder of the sea, which is where the rain comes from."

"You don't believe that," says Cobus.

There is a pause.

"You don't have to be afraid of Jolanus," says Manja. "He will not hurt you. He could not."

"You are a crackpot yourself," says Cobus, giving up, "to hang this strange object up." He walks out. "Crackpot," she hears him say to himself as he returns to his own room beside hers.

Manja prefers Cobus' openly fearful, or otherwise shrugging, response to matters incomprehensible to him, to Eric's patronising reactions. Eric is totally dismissive of Jolanus' creativity. To Eric, the fact that Jolanus was released from National Service for being a drug addict offers an explanation of everything else, the bottom judgment being that Jolanus is 'wasted', that he is a 'hopeless case'. Manja finds these judgments, gently voiced though they may be, deeply unconvincing. Could it be that Eric is jealous of Jolanus?

Jolanus visits her and brings a daring synthesis of rain-callers.

"This is a rain-director," he says humorously, but nevertheless proudly.

The rain-director consists of a number of rain-callers. Beads and feathers link the shells and bones. These represent Jolanus' thoughts as he labours. He contributes in this way to healing the sadness and the wrongness and the horribleness in the country. To Manja's rain-director he has added a special touch - a piece of his palette.

"I know," says Jolanus, "I should try to sell my work. I give too much of it away."

Manja drags her table over, puts a stool on top, screws a hook into the ceiling and carefully hangs her beautiful rain-director in the middle of her room. She is delighted. She cherishes gifts from the heart, or from the hands (it is the same thing, after all).

Jolanus sits down on her bed. "Why don't you," he says, "help me with my Spiral Space Project?"

Manja knows about the Spiral Space Project. It is the most purposeful task that Jolanus has set himself. It is based on the knowledge and

experience that Jolanus has gained while painting spirals, which are unquestionably a potent way of arranging a continuous line. Whether the spirals loop clockwise or not is crucial. A person has to decide whether the direction is taken from the outside in or vice versa. Jolanus has experimented with these questions for many years and has finally come to the conclusion that the most appropriate spiral under present conditions is one that curls anti-clockwise from the outside in (though naturally all spirals have their proper place and function). Jolanus is a likeable person and has a loyal circle of not only female followers and so, over the years, he has succeeded in a spiral-building project all around the highveld. He and his supporters gather on weekends and together carry hundreds of large stones and rocks to designated places. These are then laboriously, and presumably amid much cheer, arranged in spiral shapes. Manja has never once joined them. She feels too 'young', too 'innocent' - as if there were something unrestrained, even orgiastic, in these events. She knows that alcohol flows freely amid other mind-altering substances, and that Jolanus and his friends do, in fact, occasionally organise group events in order to fulfil their politically subversive desire to unite the different races in the most literal manner imaginable. She senses something wild, but at the same time nothing bad, in these activities and her main regret is her knowledge that she is somehow unqualified. Is she, despite everything, finally untouchable? Is she truly beyond reach in the perfect sleep of her loneliness? Is that frigid pupa of her innards forever destined to hatch in the dull bloom of night, expecting death at the first eyewink of day?

"The spirals," Jolanus says, "are focus, like perspective for the clouds, so they can gather overhead and wash clean the blood on the ground."

Manja says nothing. She could tear him to pieces in a flash purely by means of a retort. Not that she wishes to do this, but merely the intuition of the possibility is unbearable to her. He hands her a cassette. 'Spiral Space Project', it says on lilac, 'Jolanus de Jager'. She inserts the cassette in her recorder and hears him in his thorny, unmistakable accent encourage her to relax her body, to take flight in a kaleidoscope of shapes. Purple diamond. Green triangle. And she must eat good food. Despite herself, she smiles.

Chapter 11 In the Footsteps of Eric

The Berlin Wall falls. The Cold War is declared over and the Rooi Gevaar pales. The South African government unbans numerous anti-apartheid organisations, including the African National Congress and the Communist Party. Within a few months, the most famous prisoner in the world, Nelson Mandela, is ceremoniously released. For the first day or two, people are surprised because he looks Chinese rather than African. Nobody doubts that he is the saviour.

Does this mean that it is time for Manja to step aside? She is not a qualified teacher and as the children return to what remains of their schools, a vague instinct suggests that she ought to move on. She comes to be troubled by a recurring dream, in which her students repeatedly rape her. They stand in a long line, each awaiting his turn while the girls yodle and cheer them on. Manja cannot deny that more often than not in her waking life she feels overpowered by the young people's incessant demands on her seemingly unlimited love, her knowledge and complete attention upon them.

Then, as if he had picked up her very feelings, Eric leaves P.S.L., and his absence makes palpable to Manja her largely unacknowledged dependence upon him. True, it is exclusively a work-related dependence, but the person appointed in his stead has none of his integrity, nor any of his valuable skills.

She did not know until now how much her teacherly inspiration had relied on Eric's calm, forward-looking faith. He held evaluative meetings on a monthly basis with the tutors, was a brilliant fundraiser and such a skilful budgeter as to enable the project to have organised annual weekends away for all the senior students for two years running now.

The new Project Manager has a difficult act to follow, but he chooses not to follow it at all. He is genial enough and very sunny with all the tutors. He expresses his appreciation by buying them all expensive folders for their notes and lesson plans. As time passes, however, it is not only Manja who notices the new manager's alarming weakness for luxury stationery. The secretary, Edith, with whom Manja has struck up something of a friendship over the years, is a gentle and conscientious person who, when her new boss fails to provide her with the till slips and invoices she requires for her duties, is at first skeptical; then

grows downright alarmed and depressed. Then the new manager fails to turn up at the annual meeting with the project's primary donors and soon after that the Standard Nine weekend away, which Edith has already organised, has to be cancelled. Nobody says so, but everybody knows that the money meant for the trip has been traded for the iridescent range of goods from the stationery conglomerate that dominates the country.

To make matters worse, when the donors come to investigate, it is generally felt that the manager cannot be held responsible for his mistakes, because he is new at this type of work and needs time to affirm himself, as he puts it. At a meeting held for the tutors, Manja is bold enough to suggest that Edith, who is surely just as entitled to affirm herself, might really be the one who ought to take over the project. The idea is met with a few blank stares and utter silence, after which things continue as before, which is to say they degenerate.

Under these circumstances, Manja loses all faith in her capacities as teacher. More and more frequently does she find herself in a state that can only be called an 'out of body' experience during her classes. A part of her seems literally to leave in the lurch another self - the visible, tangible one that, willy-nilly, is condemned to be separate from the students - because of what? Is it the power which the position of tutor assumes? Manja searches in vain for an answer. 'This is wrong,' she thinks in dismay, even while she hears her voice saying something else - about adverbial clauses, or the past perfect tense, or whatever it is - 'for one person to stand before so many, telling them what is what, telling them what they must do.'

More and more painfully does she feel that there is something essentially amiss in her teaching methods, even though they are 'learner-centred' as she has been taught they ought to be, in regular training courses. She knows she is effective, well liked, even, as a teacher. Yet she is the wrong sort of person for others to look up to. In every sense. Why? The answer to this question remains obscure. Her efforts to seat herself among her students, literally to lower herself - struggling against the unwanted authority that her position automatically accords her - have only very partially been successful. Is she shirking her responsibilities? An analysis of her dream, in which she is the sexual victim of her students, could offer pointers,

but Manja feels too ashamed of the dream's overt sexist and racist qualities to dare to take it seriously. At best, the dream seems to tell her that she is not able to live up to her self-appointed role as devious soldier in the Struggle, because of an inherent inferiority. There grows now, seemingly out of nowhere, a creeping intuition from within that the very concept of schooling is totally absurd. That they are producing, despite themselves, merely identical sausages as through a sausage machine. Are Willem and Gila right, after all, with their uncompromising, completely anti-syllabus stance? She has heard them both declare that Karl will go to school over their dead bodies. This phase in her life is made more difficult for her by a change within her private body. Since four or five months now she has suffered her periods in a way that is completely new. There is a total absence of strength in her limbs and she lies awake at night feeling amazement more than anything else, in response to the vicious pain that seizes her abdomen. She is not accustomed to suffering her monthly cycle and has never comprehended that to others it is a 'curse'. Thus it does not occur to her to defend herself in any way against this unknown attack from within her own interior.

By day she continues with her work, gritting her teeth, at a loss as to how to respond in any way other than by entirely ignoring herself. This tactic becomes increasingly difficult, however.

One day following an embattled night of bloodshed - she fighting herself amid hallucinations of ruined roses - a student shows her a photograph of a few learners standing arm in arm with two tutors before a brick wall.

Manja's misgivings quickly crystallise. Beside the learners and the maths tutor, looking coyly to the side (everyone else is facing the camera) in a rather see-through green skirt and embroidered blouse, is a girl-woman. A stereotyped teacher in the worst possible sense: a goody-goody, someone who does not even know she is completely inauthentic and defeated. With a sinking feeling, shot through with panic, Manja identifies herself within seconds as being the bearer of that nondescript angelic face. She notices that her body seems almost to be supported by the boys on either side of her, as if she were no more than a dummy. Oh, she is fallen!

Perhaps it is not a good day on which to stand back and judge herself, take stock and make decisions. Holding the photo, Manja is overcome by

a severe (by now vaguely familiar) lameness in the legs. She plonks down in the nearest chair, helpless against the force of gravity. Her hand flops down onto the photograph. She is dizzy. She must find a toilet. She leaps past the concerned faces of the other tutors, holding her mouth, runs into the Girls' and vomits heartily into the nearest toilet bowl. Lunch is completely undigested, then comes the rather more sour soup of breakfast. At last, bile. Her body starts and stalls with a life entirely of its own. Finally she gets up. Her eyes are watering and she wipes them. She flushes the toilet, blows her nose, and rinses her hands and mouth at the basin. She feels much better now.

A few evenings later, Manja visits Eric, who lives by himself in one of a block of four flats in Pope Street. He is one of the few men whom Manja has seen display a sense that they actually care about the appearance of their immediate surroundings. Outside his door is a small palm tree in an earthenware pot.

Eric seems surprised and pleased to see her. She has only ever been to his place for work-related meetings. He is not busy. He steps buoyantly aside.

Manja enters and is faced with the large, burgundy oriental-design wall-hanging that covers the opposite wall. In his lounge are bookshelves containing mainly non-fiction. The words 'Education' and 'Communication' loom large on several spines. Two or three decorative Swazi candles newly on the market stand about and on top of one of the shelves are his three soapstone monkeys sitting in a row. ('Hear No, Speak No, See No Evil'.) Beside these is a new copper wire sculpture of a saxophone which falls over as Manja walks past. Hastily, she resurrects it, but it will not obey. She leaves it lying.

Eric waves her towards one of his two large brown beanbags upon the parquet floor, which is partially covered with the lovely hand-woven carpet of geometric African patterns. Eric's turquoise-eyed and rather plump Siamese-Tabby Mau glides about the flat exuding noble self-assurance. Eric puts on some music and, under Mau's watchful eye, Manja wiggles herself into the beanbag less covered with hairs, to the tune of 'Sensitive Kind'. As she receives the mango juice Eric brings her, she splutters a little. She really admires him, but on a personal level she cannot help being made nervous by Eric Griffin's permanently faultless mien and behaviour, as if his life were a script that he knew

by heart. As for her, she improvises. Which means she plunges in. "I want to leave P.S.L.," she announces, before Eric has even sat down. "I mean, sorry, how are you?" She grins at him sheepishly. Thankfully, Eric ignores her faux pas. "You could not have come at a better time," he replies, "how did you know?" He gazes at her, full of fascination. She frowns. He laughs, lights a cigarette (a recently acquired habit) and inhales comfortably. He likes her, she knows that, but why does she always feel so estranged from herself in his presence? Superficially he inspires, even exhilarates her, yes, she can't deny that; but beneath that he makes her feel empty, or annihilated, as if there were nothing at all in her centre. Best to stick to matters of the head with him. Eric holds his glass of mango juice in one hand and strokes his neatly trimmed, coppery beard with the other. He sets down the glass, brushes the hairs off the remaining beanbag and settles himself. He leans forward and draws towards himself a small, black ashtray, touching Manja's foot as he does so. He smiles meaningfully. Manja sits cross-legged and regards Mau, who is purringly trying to make the most of her knees.

"*People for Learning* - or P.F.L.," says Eric, grinning at the acronym so similar to his previous place of work, "is a supplement to the *Rising Sun*. You know the *Rising Sun*, don't you? It's a Catholic-funded paper."

"Yes."

"We are independent of them. We survive on donor money - both local and foreign," Eric goes on, "and we are a small part of a huge bureaucracy which I am sure you've heard of - CoHETSA."

Manja knows about CoHETSA. Even now it controls virtually all non-governmental educational activities and publications in the country. What it stands for she does not know, but it has something to do with education.

"Our readership," continues Eric, "has till now been mainly workers. The changes in the country have inspired a new plan, an exciting plan, I think. We want to help teachers as they return to the classrooms. Provide lesson plans and information for them to use, that sort of thing. We want to extend our readership to include anybody who might suffer from irregular or disrupted teaching. We will start with English Literature and Maths. We already have somebody who is interested in the

English Page," he concludes, "but you can share it with her. Personally, I would prefer that."

Ironically, despite all the changes both big and small, Manja's new position at P.F.L. requires more than ever that she examine dreary, monochrome Hardy and Strutt publications so closely as if she were in love with them. She cannot avoid the prescribed books and poems, must face the empty, uncommitted exercises that they foist upon their readers year after year. More than before, she has despite herself to accept the ultimate in sausage-machines - the national examinations, which P.F.L. is terribly dedicated to helping learners to pass. On the other hand, the new political climate does allow her fearlessly to address the historical context of a given work or writer, inasmuch as it deepens understanding. This, after all, brings in breaths of fresh air in that it compels her to do research at the university library, always a favourite haunt of hers.

On one occasion, the editor (a tubby woman with ginger hair and green eyes who wears only saris) permits her to include something completely outside the syllabus - namely, Philip Larkin's 'This Be The Verse', with its famous opening line 'They fuck you up, your mum and dad,' and ending to the unforgettable beat of 'Man hands on misery to man/ It deepens like a coastal shelf/ Get out as early as you can/ And don't have any kids yourself.'

Is there something jaded in Manja that causes her to include this poem? Ostensibly, she wishes to illustrate the power of rhyme and meter, but in truth she probably wants to expose her readers, if just this once, to something categorically different from the proper poems which she knows is their exclusive reading matter and upon which she blames the students' perennial failure to visit either libraries or book shops. To learn, it is necessary to feel, is her motto now. The pupa is not unconscious. It gets wet when it rains. How does it stop itself from rotting? There is an inner fire, blowing itself slowly, slowly up into dry wings - dreaming from the heart of transformation.

Yes, Manja wants to shock. She wants to burn her students with reminders. They must become ash, like Gila. They must fumble and dance themselves to death in stupid spirals, like Jolanus. They must feel unpleasure, they must feel pain. They must sense their smallness in the face of the power given to humanity both to think and feel.

What a relief that she no longer has to face young people. If they touched her now, they would burn themselves on her body. In the privacy of her room, as she writes, she is a hearth of passionate intentions. When a representative of the bishops who involve themselves with the *Rising Sun* telephones Eric in a flurry of Christian outrage over the Larkin poem (their adherence to Liberation Theology notwithstanding), and remind him in his capacity as Managing Editor that the circulation of the paper is a few million, Manja is still able to support Eric with an argument which the bishops ultimately accept about the sheer possibilities of language.

For the reproachful hurt which Eric has to endure from his own parents, however, against the poem in their son's paper, as they see it, she has no remedy.

Manja sits beside Eric at his desk. Eric's head is in his hands. He has just suffered another conversation with his father. His mother, far away in Cape Town though she may be, is in tears over her son's slight to herself and all the love she ever gave him. The other office workers tiptoe carefully around Eric and Manja, till eventually they have all gone out for early lunch.

Like Manja herself, who now wears her hair in a bob, Eric has changed. His beard is now fully instated. Despite herself, Manja cannot help thinking sometimes now that he behaves as if the road ahead of him were straight, rather than narrow. The bourgeois revolution (as Gila refers sneeringly to the changes) will in all likelihood serve him well into the future. He has ceased being a vegetarian - as if he retrospectively associates the years of the Struggle with a certain asceticism, which can now be discarded, rather than principles. He has put on a few kilos which admittedly suit him well. There is no doubt that at *People for Learning* he works harder than ever. Innovative as before, he has purchased a desktop-publishing programme for the office, where people had contentedly been cutting and pasting until his arrival. The newspaper has become sharper in its image and Eric has sought with moderate success to extend its readership beyond the country's borders, to Botswana and Zimbabwe. When positions become available (they have begun to advertise officially), he takes care to bow with what can only be called grace to the demands of affirmative action, which everywhere else is already causing friction and embarrassment. He seems to possess

an instinct for nosing out capable people with 'actualisable potential' as he calls it.

The term frightens Manja. Is there such a thing as 'bad seed'? How many of a million pupae, after all, will never hatch? At the same time Eric's drive humbles her as, seen through his eyes, she would dearly like to believe that she is an instance of 'actualisable potential', rather than a 'lost case'. Her heart contracts fearfully.

"He is a lost case," Eric says.

He is describing his brother. Manja has not been aware that Eric has a brother.

"He has disowned us all," continues Eric. "He lives on the streets. I am my parents' only hope. My mom read the poem as an accusation. She thinks I'm telling her it's all her fault." He sighs.

"That is ridiculous," says Manja, "Why should she think that? You don't write the page."

"How could she know, Manja? I must be honest, I think it's a bit daft we still don't acknowledge authors, but there you are. As far as my mother is concerned, I am in charge of this paper, so everything it contains is a reflection of me and of what I believe. Actually, I'm not sure that anybody exists in the world for my mother other than her family," he adds crisply.

"You're lucky to have a mother," observes Manja, "neither of my parents have ever seen the page I write, nor will they ever do so. They have no real interest in anything I do. All they or at any rate my father wants to know is whether or not I can support myself. Do I have enough money to survive? Nothing else matters."

"And why should it?" counters Eric, "it leaves you free."

"Your brother is free," replies Manja, "I'd like to meet him sometime. What's his name?"

"He is not free," says Eric, "what he has done is a reaction. In everything he does, he seeks only to act oppositely to the rest of us. We - my father - has money. Therefore, Theo must strive to be poor. We try to be - well, sensible in our actions, I'm not saying we always succeed, but at least we try to do good in the world. Theo does his utmost to be hurtful. He wants nothing more than to hurt us, to break us. He steals - groceries, clothes, and books. My dad's had to bail him out of court twice. He is a write-off, Manja, the least free person in the world."

"How can you speak like this," asks Manja, "about your own brother?" Eric ignores her. He takes the paper lying underneath his arms upon the desk. He opens it on Manja's page and lifts it. It breathes briefly, then he beats it down and pushes it towards her.

"This has been a mistake," he says, "an opportunity to learn to play by the rules. I am sorry to say we - or I - have burned my fingers in this experiment. Let's forget it and let's please move on."

Manja walks home thoughtfully. She is grateful to Eric for having provided her with the opportunity to contribute in her way to their cause. It is through him that she was able to move from teaching a science subject to her true love, the English language. It is because of him that she may now do her work in privacy, which she far prefers. Not least of all, he has in all of this played an indispensable part in her growth from a sullen, snapping, overweight puppy - a pupa - into a - well, not a butterfly exactly. But she has valuable skills and, thanks to her journeys on foot from one end of Johannesburg to the other, she has become sleeker, if not winged. She still squirms with displeasure whenever she happens to glimpse herself in shop windows, but she is not vain and is happy, isn't she, that with Eric's help she has secured for herself a little spot in the world where she feels both safe and stimulated.

As for Eric's brother and their current family drama - these are entanglements of far too complicated a nature for Manja to worry about. If she is to meet the awful brother, she trusts that it will happen without effort on her part.

When Manja returns to the university campus for the use of its library, her route leads her through lively, dirty, ever more populous Hillbrow. Today, there ahead of her, is the proud hobo, as Manja privately calls him. He is advancing in the same direction as her, though at a much slower pace. He has aroused her attention before with his eyes that stare like aquamarines out of his dirty brown face. He wears his hands in the pockets of his long coat, as usual. He has never yet approached her and she has never yet given him anything. He is obviously not afraid of the crowds trampling on his bare toes, which are black with dirt. His neck, as always, is straight; he holds his head - which would be beautiful if it were clean - straight, permanently wearing a superior air.

Sometimes Manja wonders what it might be like to join him. Now, above all, when everybody else is jumping on the gravy train. A part of her is tugged towards this filthy, restless life. To have nothing. To be nothing. To piss and masturbate blithely, anyhow, anywhere in a corner, some untidy spot.

She holds her elbows as she walks, rubbing the itchy scars on her arms. Has she herself been through a trial? During these past years, she has interrogated herself mercilessly on the question that she seems by nature born to escape the worst and she has come to the conclusion that her stubborn naïveté is a failing.

Long before Gila's detention she went so far as to cut into her arms with a sharp knife, training herself as she saw it then, to endure pain. She did it. But she has never tried to analyse what she did. During the act, which she was aware would no doubt be considered perverse, she made herself look at the roses outside her window, or directly into the sunlight - anything powerful or beautiful, transcending her meagre self. Her aim was to reach a point of absolute control over her consciousness and when she finally achieved the desired outcome, feeling no physical pain, but only a strange slicing sensation, she danced for joy, rotating her arms over her head, because the blood that trickled over her skin was not red, but orange - light, sparkling, cool, eternal. Are they initiation scars, then - self-inflicted in the absence of appropriate rituals?

Manja folds her arms tightly as she walks down through Fontana Centre, past the ragged children and the man with both his legs in braces who always sits upon the steps.

She hid the wounds, under decoratively woven wristbands, until they healed. The scars are important, that much she knows. They are reminders that thought and feeling are real. Thought and feeling are flesh and blood. There is no difference between her flesh and spirit. When one feels pain, so does the other. When one feels pain, or dies, so does the other.

Here is Big Mama, with her skirt of towels, sitting on an embankment with her crook laid down beside her. Before the large, pungent-smelling woman is a trolley full of books and boxes that serve as her bedding. She never notices Manja. Her nose is forever buried in a Mills and Boon romance.

Manja looks out for Sylvia. She is in front of the shop on the other side. Sylvia has spotted her and is waving for Manja to come over. "Hello, my friend," she cries excitedly, clutching Manja's arm up to the elbow. "Business was bad that side today," she complains hoarsely and gestures towards the pavement opposite. She abandons herself to her grating laugh.

Sylvia cannot walk. She is seated on a flat piece of cardboard. To move herself, she has two short crutches whereby she drags herself forward, like a locust without hind legs (hers are bandaged). At night, she trawls herself around the corner to the church where she receives a meal and shelter. The skin on her face is raw pink and covered with a beige, sulphur-smelling crême. Her head is permanently enclosed in a nylon stocking. The overall effect is hideous.

"Haaia!" cries Sylvia, clapping her little hands, laughing and sending such irresistible sparks and shafts of light from her large, deep-brown eyes that passers-by cannot help themselves. She is a consummate beggar who gives all she has for her alms: her deep-rough voice uttering encouraging cries, her clapping hands, her twinkling eyes reminding all untiringly of their duty towards her.

Sylvia digs into the quivering puddings in her bra, then holds out a small, gold watch. She could not be more puffed with pride.

"Did you pay for that?" asks Manja disbelievingly.

"Yes!" cries the beggar, "It's me! It's me who buys this for my daughter. She must have a gold watch. She has her B.A. at university in

Transkei. I - " Sylvia pats her bosom, "I paid the money for the university. I have twins. One girl, one boy. My son is not good. He does not pass. Only the daughter passes."

She tucks the watch back into the mushy flesh over her heart and holds her hand there.

Manja feels - what is it? Respect? Yes, it is respect for these people who seem to know so well how to live, how to abide without bitterness. She passes the shelter for street children and rounds down towards the Civic Centre, darkly visible on the other side of the road. Along the wall to her left, someone has spray-painted a message in red. 'One settler, one bullet', it reads. It has been there for about a week. Today there is a rejoinder, in black: 'One bomb, many kaffirs'. Only two weeks ago, a molotov cocktail was thrown into a Yeoville house not far from Manja's block. Manja crosses the street, turns around and re-reads the 'dialogue'. 'My countrymen,' she thinks to herself, 'my tribe.' There is little doubt in her mind that the words on the wall capture the truth.

It is the truth not so much of a spirit of violence, which is obvious, but of an - equality. A sameness, mutual understanding. It may be war, but the two camps clearly - literally - occupy the same ground. They respect one another sufficiently to bother to respond to each other's attacks. It is ugly, yes, and if seen from a distance perhaps even silly, but there is also something else which Manja's heart suddenly seems to recognise.

Its name is pride. Black consciousness. White consciousness. To Manja, at this moment, it is simply Consciousness. Yin and Yang licking each other's faces with their sharp and jealous tongues. Each I ingesting, then imploding upon the other.

Manja stares at the writing and as she turns slowly and resumes her stride which takes her into the hard, cleft bosom of the Civic Centre, she smiles to herself, indeed, a small chuckle escapes from her lips. She passes through the stark architecture of the Centre. It is August, the one month in Johannesburg that does not lie still like the rest. Dust and grit are being swept ferociously through the vents which the building's tall façades create. She crinkles her nose involuntarily as the dirt blasts into her eyes, which suddenly fill with tears.

'Political graffiti is one thing,' she thinks. She has gradually become less and less able to read the papers these days, because of the way

the news seem to cart away her feelings by the truckload, leaving a quarry for her heart. Following Mandela's release, an immense confusion seems to have taken hold of the country. She has no words for it. They are living in a slaughterhouse. Now that the hated government has seated itself with the previously banned organisations, it is as if the multitude, prepared as it was for battle, has suddenly seen its foe crumble into its very midst. Looking about in wonder they fall upon each another in a cannibalistic frenzy, looking among themselves for the old arch-enemy. An image returns to Manja from the past: Salvador Dali's understanding of the Spanish Civil War, his version of *Guernica*. The painting depicts two Iberian creatures in a state of mutual repast upon each other. The War, said Dali, was not a political, but a natural phenomenon. Life eats itself.

Here, however, war has not officially been declared. On the contrary, the huge changes have been termed 'peaceful revolution'. Is the way in which Gila curls her lips whenever somebody mentions these words perhaps, after all, the only possible response? Manja hurries through the clashing, windy currents, grimacing and scowling despite herself. At last, she reaches the comparative sanctuary of the campus and finds the book on John Donne that she is looking for. Was he a sell-out, converting to Anglicanism for the sake of a secure, worldly position? Catholic guilt tormented him for this decision for the remainder of his life. Manja intends her editor to scan in two pictures of the poet - one showing him in his youth; the other, dead in his shroud. What they are going to do about the artwork for the lesson on Herman Charles Bosman's poem, 'Seed', she does not yet know.

Before she leaves the campus, she knocks on Hanno Greeve's door in the Department of Philosophy. Han has for several years now been doctoring a thesis which, as far as Manja knows, has something to do with socialism and Christianity. Hanno is busy working on it at this very moment. To be exact, he is growling and shaking his fists at the papers lying on the desk before him. He is delighted at the opportunity of taking a break.

They carry their coffees outside in polystyrene cups and seat themselves beside a pond in which large, pale and black Koi are oozing through the water stonily and unreflective. Manja trails a dry leaf in the unclean, rather smelly pond and the Koi gather round like embroiled worms.

"They think I am going to feed them," she says and drops the leaf.
Hanno is silent.

"Han?"

"Yes?"

"Why don't you ever visit me?"

"I didn't know you wanted me to visit!" yelps Hanno. "I will, if you want me to, of course I will."

Has she been so offish? Why is it that people don't know one another? Are her and Hanno not good friends?

"I do," she says, "please come and see me. Nobody visits me anymore."

"Cobus is quite intimidating," replies Hanno, "and you do nothing to stop him. You seem quite contented as you are."

"Goodness," says Manja, "I suppose I am. But I don't want to turn to stone, do I? Please come. This evening, if you are free."

University of Cape Town

Manja walks on into town to CoHETSA's offices. She enters the fusty building, which is occupied by hundreds of CoHETSA staff and their projects, programmes, posters, meetings and plans. She greets the new, young, dashing security guard and, unwilling to wait for the smelly, rumbling lift, climbs the eight floors to P.F.L. via the much cleaner, quieter stairway. Between the seventh and eighth floors is a Ladies' and just as she is about to go in, a familiar figure comes through the eighth floor door and pads down the stairs towards her. Manja is surprised. It cannot be. The figure stares at her with penetrating eyes and nods briefly, as if he recognises her too, and continues on his way, trailing a pungent animal odour in his wake.

Manja, ever-careful not to sit down in public places, hovers over the toilet. She gazes at the graffiti blossoming all over the tiles. 'War is menstrual envy', she reads. The man whose path she has just crossed is the proud hobo. As ever, his presence, even if seen only briefly and at a distance, alerts her. She is aware of unfamiliar sensations that prick her curiosity. What on earth is he doing here?

The English Page editor goes through Manja's articles, pointing out the changes she has made. They agree that no further graphics will be required for the lesson on 'Death Be Not Proud'. As for the lesson on 'Seed' - the editor smiles mysteriously and pushes an A5 page towards Manja.

Upon the paper has been drawn in soft, grey pencil a mielie cob, half-revealed in its sheath. The shadows on the separate kernels, which are very sensitively outlined, appear to be rather half-hearted. When Manja frowns and looks more closely, she sees that each kernel contains a miniscule image. In the central kernel is a tiny farmer with an ox-drawn plough. Another contains a woman wearing an apron and a doek, yet another a windmill and so on. The sketch is a perfect rendering of the poem, transforming words into lines and shadows, showing in an instant the poem's complex meaning, which is that the cob grows from more than only seed: it grows from the farmer's labour and all that goes into that labour, including his wife, her work, their children - everything that is a part of the farmer's life.

Manja's mouth opens. Has she ever sat so still? The sketch is infinitely gentle. It is piercingly true to the poem. She looks up at the editor in her luminous green and gold sari.

"Who did this?" she asks.

"A guy called Theo," replies the editor, "Eric's brother, actually. Theo Griffin. You just missed him. He said he was interested in doing our artwork on a casual basis, so we gave him your poem - Bosman's poem - and this is what he came up with."

"It is much too beautiful," says Manja with as much authority as she can muster under the circumstances. How can Eric speak so scornfully about his brother when this is what he is able to do? The proud hobo! How could she have known?

"It is a waste to put this in the paper," she continues, "nobody will recognise these tiny images once the illustration is reduced, as it will have to be."

She holds the paper in her hands and does not want to let it go. Is it for the first time that she feels that - everywhere, under their feet - there is something precious, something invisible and mute, that is routinely trodden upon? Who can explain it? Why can Jolanus not sell his art? Why does this man - this artist Theo - walk the streets? What do they lack? Why do people not kneel before them, before their generous surprises, the soothing gentleness of their hands' work?

"There is nothing else we can use," replies the sari, "it is a pity, I agree, but it will have to be."

"Print just the picture," says Manja in a fit of impulsiveness, "leave out my article. The drawing says everything the students need to know! He can have my pay for this week."

The editor squeezes out an indulgent smile. Manja returns the smile. Why does she? It pains her.

"It will hold up production, I'm afraid," says the editor, "to find another picture."

Who wants to take beauty, truth seriously? It takes up too much time. Manja understands. One must grit the teeth.

In the evening, Hanno brings a slab of raisin and nut chocolate, which is what Manja usually has for supper. They consume it easily between them.

"Willem and Gila are starting a new life," says Hanno, "they have bought a farm in the Free State. Gila is pregnant again."

"There's so many babies," replies Manja, "since Mandela was released. Yeoville has become a nursery, have you noticed?" She giggles. "As if all the pollen previously in detention has suddenly sprung forth. From wombs of blood," she adds, more seriously.

Hanno sighs. "I don't know," he says, "where all this is going." Then he continues, "You speak in metaphors. It isn't always easy to understand what you mean."

"Metaphors?"

"Yes. Don't you know it?"

"Maybe."

"You do. It's unusual." He gazes at her fixedly.

"You were the one who said the detainees were pollen, Han," replies Manja defensively, "I only remembered it. Have you forgotten?"

"Did I say that?"

"You did. You were very upset at the time."

Hanno shakes his head.

"But metaphors are special," continues Manja, "you know why?"

"Yes?"

"I thought about it when I was still teaching. We get taught, oh it's an implied comparison. It's not. A metaphor doesn't compare two things. It unifies them, for better or for worse." She interlocks her fingers violently.

"You're single-handedly redefining metaphor? You'll turn the books upside down. I look forward to that."

"It's not me," Manja replies. "I found it in a book of course. Join two words with the verb to be. I am you. You are me. Which means? Metaphor is sex in language. It's two words having sex." Hanno's eyes open alarmingly wide, but Manja is undeterred. "She is a pupa. He's pollen in the wind. One word, one thing becomes the other. They join and then they make a child. A new meaning, never heard before."

"She is a pupa," Hanno says triumphantly, "you are talking about yourself."

"No," lies Manja, "I am not. It's an example came to mind. D'you understand?"

Hanno sighs wistfully without taking his eyes off her. Then he bends down from the bed and scrabbles in his sling-bag. He extracts a roll of paper. He opens it slowly, then turns to show it to Manja. It is a copied picture of himself at the races, binoculars round his neck. His

eyes are half-closed. His shoulders sag. At the bottom of the paper Manja reads: 'To Manja, with deepest love, Han'.

"I don't give this frivolously," says Hanno.

Manja takes the page. She looks at him. What is it? A thing? A feeling - a translucent warmth falls out of his eyes and over his entire body. It circles his meagre, baby-like hair, descends over his soft paunch, his womanly philosopher's hands. She allows herself to be embraced by the warmth and she accepts it as sunshine into her body. When he confesses, "I love you. From the moment I saw you I did," however, she is aware that she is not in any way equal to those words.

Can it be that closeness by the hearth leaves her so untouched? What does she dream of, then, to lure her fancy out of hiding? As she bends to retrieve her clothes, she could swear Theo's distant, ice blue gaze glances sharply off her, vanishing as she turns to Han again. He has noticed something.

"What?" he says, "What is it?"

University of Cape Town

Chapter 14 Eric's Decision

It is Saturday morning. Eric sits up on his three-quarter mattress and stares at the small, white flowers on the brown background of his duvet cover. He inhales smoke from his low nicotine cigarette and scowls. From outside, the rhythmic bellow of a mielie-vendor comes in and drives itself into the marrow. What these vendors articulate, or believe themselves to be articulating, is a mystery. They glide from street to street with their maize cobs on their heads and bellow. Wherever they are, the entire suburb hears them. There was a time when the vendors' voices were simply a part of Eric's life. Had their peaceful, albeit noisy, passage not even made him feel elementally secure? These days, however, the monotony of the calls can set off harsh fantasies in his mind. He shocks and shames himself as he sees himself leap out of doors in his pyjama shorts, hurl his fist into the vendor's face, watch her head kick back in slow motion before he pushes her viciously down and smothers her with her cobs. The fantasies have a life entirely of their own. Sometimes, he holds a panga. What is a panga? He has never even seen one. Still, here he is, brandishing it before the startled woman, raising his arm and slicing her perfectly, easily in two, as if she were butter, or a pear. The two halves fold over gently, one to each side, like fleshy leaves as the fantasy dissipates and, for a moment, blissful silence reigns.

Eric shakes his head violently. Where do these childish visions come from? The vendors are only doing their job. He even helps to keep them in business, periodically buying their large-kernel, raw white corn. He knows they have no other option than to walk up and down the streets on their thick, often sorely mottled-looking legs, covering miles in their misshapen canvas shoes. What is happening to him? Is he losing his compassion? Why is he taking out his resentment and frustration on these innocent matriarchs?

The vendor is advancing. Eric groans and closes his eyes.

If the mielie woman has no choice, what about himself? CoHETSA's donors are withdrawing one by one. The Struggle, it is held, is over. As the leading politicians try to find common ground, CoHETSA and numerous organisations like it are being plunged headfirst into the so-called 'real world'. By which is meant, for those who use the term, a world divided, rather than united by purpose. Before, there were two camps,

neatly (a relative term, of course), naturally at war. The war being over, with neither camp having lost or won, there is now complete disorder. In the ancient CoHETSA premises, the disorder is enacted on a daily basis in an exemplary fashion. Many projects suddenly and with good reason are panic-stricken that the ground upon which their existence depends will fall away overnight, sinkhole fashion. Others greedily seize, or perhaps create, opportunities which they anticipate might lead to themselves replacing the old, though not yet extinct, Department of Education. In the process, positions become vacant, while others are filled, in a hurly-burly of worker bees become queen bees become guardian bees, transforming themselves into honeybees who might fly spontaneously into fieldwork, Eric thinks sarcastically. Not forgetting the inevitable masses of larvae and drones that by their very nature cannot do more than simply wait to be fed.

The cigarette has glimmered its way down to the filter. Eric stumps it out in his little obsidian ashtray. A gift from Theo. Stolen, in all likelihood. He throws the duvet aside and goes through to the lounge where Mau is sitting in the sun. She greets him with a gentle singsong of a purr and slinks warmly around his legs as he rifles through his records. What will heal him now? He hesitates when he comes to his Gregorian chants. Easter, Pentecost, Corpus Christi. The monks never exceeded a very limited distance between two sounds for fear of the stimulus that too great a variety in pitch could cause in the human soul. The bellowing fades into the distance. Eric pulls out a Dire Straits album. What he loves most about electronic music is the way it seems to materialise out of nowhere. It is literally out of this world. The electric guitar's heart-rending baying is always a sound that reaches into his very soul.

Eric sits cross-legged before the hifi, elbows at his sides, his fists loosely extended. His head drops back, his eyes close and he pivots softly from left to right, drinking above all those cadences that do not require breath.

Eric has frequently now to apply what seem nearly like therapeutic methods to help himself remain sane. This period at P.F.L. is one of the worst he has known in his life. He is deeply, indeed proudly, attached to clarity and sense and is therefore vulnerable to heated emotions when they display themselves. His coolness literally melts on

such occasions and he is no more. That is how it feels, at any rate. He arrives home in the evenings, slumps into one of his beanbags and simply stares into space. Mau sniffs and licks his hands, purring daintily, but with such mild-mannered perseverance, that on more than one occasion he finds himself gradually as if awakened from the dead by her attentions. Then a sudden tear may sting his eye as he becomes aware of a ghastly emptiness within him. The tear always subsides rapidly back into the deep, but by no means overflowing well that is his heart.

Sheer survival instinct (or is it only his coolness, after all, again?) prods him to start scanning the Classifieds. He has known from the beginning that his position at *People for Learning* was temporary. He is the last person to stand in the way of a promising little 'larva', to whom he himself might already have offered nutritious nectar, finding it metamorphosed, buzzing away on its own wings. Yet the weight he put on over the past couple of years melts away in the space of six months till he looks positively gaunt. His smoking disgusts even himself. He is first in the office in the mornings, and often stays well beyond closing time, trying to keep the rhythm going that is the very lifeblood of a weekly paper such as his (theirs). However, the existence of *People for Learning* hangs in the balance. What next? What is his place in life? Should he register for an H.Dip.Ed.? Should he abandon education? What does he believe? What is his path? It is probably only a matter of time before the newspaper closes down. All the major dailies, who have in the previous year jumped on the bandwagon and contracted through *People for Learning* (providing greater dissemination and welcome double pay for the writers), have now set up their own teams and are doing things according to - the words gleam hotly in Eric's head - the law of profit. Law, he thinks, law. The word alone seems to boom within him like a gong, gradually, comfortingly settling itself. A stratum, a reliable footing, an order.

He breathes and stumps out his half-smoked cigarette. A new beginning. A refuge? He is not ashamed to admit that this is, above all, what he wants. A refuge from insecurity, from questions that terrify him and which he does not feel tough enough to answer. His gaze swerves lovingly over his three monkeys, beside which lies the wire saxophone. He suddenly bends forward, puts his hands over his ears and stares at Mau with a wry smile. Mau gazes back unblinkingly and then, with what

may be a somewhat haughty mien, begins conscientiously to clean herself. Still with his eyes fixed on Mau, challenging her, Eric holds his mouth with both hands, smelling the smoke on his fingers. Then he covers his eyes. The blackness that encloses him is blissful. He feels himself to be falling, weightless, relaxing every muscle in his body. At the centre of his forehead, a round, luminous patch starts glimmering in the distance. When last did he meditate? He yields to the patch of light, waiting patiently as he knows he must, and gradually it grows more defined until at length it reveals itself to be the surface of an expansive, completely unperturbed lake, sparkling in the sun. Slowly the image fades.

Eric rises, goes into the bathroom and looks at himself in the mirror. He likes what he sees. He drops his eyelids over his light-brown eyes ever so slightly. He strokes over his beard with his lean, handsome hand. He will need to put on weight again. He must have his hair cut. Perhaps even his beard should go? His hand stops in its tracks. He does not have much of a chin. He reaches for his beard-trimmer, switches it on and neatens the outline of his face. He stands back and breathes deeply in and out. A new era has begun. From timid revolutionary to bold professional. Eric opens the trimmer and carefully empties its contents into the red, plastic bathroom bin.

The unwelcome post-exam lull has set in. It will last over Christmas well into the new year. Manja is already living off the little she managed to save during the school months. She has yet to get through these empty spells without having to appeal to her father's mercy (and the proof of his mercy: money) which, though it is invariably forthcoming, is never a pleasure for her to accept. Oliver does not keep it a secret that he thinks it to be high time for his daughter to cease 'jobbing around' and to find permanent employment.

Manja sits at her typewriter. The summer day is unshakably still. She is composing a letter to Daisy Dupont - the woman who gave birth to her. The last time she saw Daisy, Manja was twelve years old. She feels sorry for herself for not having been mothered by a woman for longer, but she has been brought up not to begrudge Daisy her success as an entrepreneur. She remembers her mother as a playful person, singing Edith Piaf and other chansons, making up her own words where she couldn't remember the lyrics. She taught Manja to love birds and flowers, and to laugh. If there is bitterness in Manja towards either of her parents, then it is because of their refusal to be like everybody else, to 'fit in', for which Manja suffered at school. For a long time after Daisy's defection - shaking her dark head and rolling her big eyes, she could no longer bear to live with "this apartheid-nonsense" - Oliver impressed upon Manja that her mother's absence was only temporary. Initially, Marguerite (Oliver still only ever uses her original name) had simply visited a school friend in Seattle. After more than three years as a full-time mother, she deserved a holiday. Manja remembers her mother's frequent temper tantrums on her return, however, which were unleashed, as it seemed, by the fact that they resided (as they were by law obliged to do) in a whites-only suburb in Benoni. King's famous "I had a dream" speech was still ringing in people's ears. Those who had ears, that is. As for Marguerite, she got on neither with the "deaf and dumb" South African people, nor with the countryside. She needed forests, meadows, streams and snow in the winter, she said; she would die on the dry, scrubby flats of the highveld. Oliver's attempts to interest her in the bush, by taking her repeatedly on camping trips, failed. After the winter fires burnt the wild areas coal-black, Marguerite became more highly-strung

than ever, suffering headaches, backache and rheumatism in her fingers, blaming the fires on the government.

"Isch wollt' isch wär ein Vögelein," Manja remembers her saying on more than one occasion, "dann könnt' isch fortfliegen." It was not accent-free, but Marguerite had mastered the German, which she preferred to speak to Manja, very well during the course of her six-year marriage to Olaf. She said she loved that language (the war notwithstanding - "Der Krieg isch doch vorbei, mon Dieu!") - even more than her own French. It seemed to be the only thing she loved about her husband who, ironically, had only ever spoken in English to Manja for as far back as she could remember. Two years later, Marguerite returned to Seattle and stayed. She wept over the phone to Manja but, as far as Manja knew, never fought against Oliver's refusal to send their daughter over. Then she changed her name to Daisy, reverted to Dupont, started a small cosmetics concern and after a few years settled in a west coast town near the Canadian border.

'Dear Daisy,' Manja types, 'thank you for all the lovely crèmes, lotions, make-up and bath-oil. I am sure they will last me another year and I will store them in the fridge as you advise. Yesterday,' she continues, pattering away at the keys dutifully and without much thought, 'I saw two hoopoes on the lawn in the garden below. They were greedily pecking away at the ground. I am sure they found some fat worms, because we had just had a big thunderstorm.'

Manja reads over the childish words. What does she have to say to Daisy Dupont? Her mother never writes back. Manja stares at the pastel blue and green boxes on the table before her. 'Daisy Dupont Moisturiser', she reads. Below the words is the company logo: a swan under a little white bridge. As the swan glides, there appears in her mind the dignified street man, Theo. She lifts her head as he, too, appears to glide away from her, passing through her again a foreign feeling born not of words; but he is so soft, so diffuse and grey that Manja could hardly call the sensation an awareness, much less so an image in her consciousness.

A knock at the front door shatters the peace. It is Eric.

He follows her into the kitchen for some tea. Manja settles the little enamelled kettle on the stove and strikes a match. She lights the top section of the oven, pushes in two slices of bread covered in cheese. The cheese melts and she sprinkles a few drops of red wine over.

"I've come to say good-bye," says Eric, "I'm making a big change."

Manja wraps a kitchen towel around the handle of the kettle. Eric steps aside and says, "I've accepted a position at Hardy and Strutt."

Manja forgets to pour and stares at Eric. Then the water splutters into the pot. The tea bags puff up and darken.

"Their head offices are in Cape Town," continues Eric, adding, "It's a big move."

Manja sets everything onto a tray which Eric carries to her room. She feels strangely empty, almost numb.

Eric is propped up on his elbow on the grass mat in the middle of her room. He compliments her on the tea, then says,

"I'm sorry. You look as if you didn't expect this."

"I didn't know," replies Manja, "that you were planning on leaving *People for Learning*."

"I don't think you know," says Eric, "how shockingly things have deteriorated there."

"No," says Manja. Her tea, which she has not touched, has whitened and cooled, sinking to below its original level. "Is this how it is in the new South Africa," she continues, "We forget all about our Struggle and join the capitalists?"

"That's not the way I see it. They've got rid of a lot of people at Hardy and Strutt and have replaced them with new blood. The new head of our division is an old comrade - she's been with the ANC for decades." Eric rises and goes to the window. There is an eerie green light that pervades the atmosphere. The season's remaining Jacarandas shine as if by an inherent purple light. Minutes pass and the light darkens. In the distance, from the east, lightning leaps in hectic scribbles; thunder rumbles after.

When the rain pours down, it is so loud on the tin roof that there is nothing to do but wait. Manja climbs onto her desk, level with the windowsill. The rain falls absolutely straight beyond the wide-open windows. Together, they watch the waterfall racing down in fierce, solid-seeming spears. There is the cool smell of wet blackness, greenness, and blue, beaten blossoms steaming. Occasionally, they look at one another and grin. What else is there to do?

Presently, Manja jumps down from her lookout, extracts her letter from the typewriter, and slides it into an envelope. The cloudburst diminishes into melodic dripping.

"Do you want to come with me to post this?" she says.

Eric steps with Manja into the smoking street and lights a cigarette. The post box is close by. The freshness outside is exhilarating; the streets are carpeted with blossoms torn down in the storm. They extend their walk, rounding the old water tower on the hill and ending up, finally, on the southwestern koppie. They tramp through wet grass and over smouldering rocks on a path that overlooks the valley to the other side. Manja leads the way, sighing happily as she breathes in the blue and gold of the evening. 'There are too many vertical lines in my life,' she thinks as she takes in the wide horizon to the south, 'I must come here more often, to allow my eyes to roam.'

In a house at the foot of the slope is an old woman rinsing a tub while a small girl with black hair toddles about in the courtyard behind. Manja continues on the rough path. She discovers a rock beneath which lie a stick, a jacket, a white cloth neatly folded, and a packet of limp carrots. Elsewhere, on the koppies on both the north and west ridges of the city, Manja has come across such small signs of human presence, always concealed in makeshift nests or dens. She fears disturbing them. The silent items put there so trustingly possess an authority she does not wish to question. Yet the nests arouse in her a poignant sense of wonder, even tenderness towards their unknown owners who, she feels, must exist as grass, as snakes, secretly within holes. Eric, ambling at a distance behind her, calls her name and, when she advances, points to a circling formation of stones.

"Oh, look!" cries Manja, "One of Jolanus' spirals!"

The spiral is comparatively small, about seven metres in diameter. Manja and Eric follow the path from the outside in, until at length they vie for the centre, one pushing the other laughingly aside the moment they have assumed a steady footing there. Manja plays the game without enjoying it. Physical contact with Eric, however innocent, frightens her. She is glad when they sit down in the spiral's embrace to watch the lights as they begin to blink in the quickly falling dusk, both in the city below and in the sky above them. There is an awkwardness, no doubt, between Eric and Manja, which is at odds with the peace that reigns here. When Manja draws her legs towards herself, shuddering from coolness, Eric stumps out his cigarette and puts his arm round her. She stiffens, ducks and swings her neck gracelessly away.

"Is that what it is about now?" she says.

"What do you mean? Is what about what?"

"Going to work for a profit-making company," she says disdainfully.

"I don't see what choice I have, to be honest," replies Eric, "nor any of us, for that matter." He plucks a strand of grass and nibbles on it.

"I don't think you have any idea what I have witnessed at CoHETSA this past year," he says, not without indignation. "Let me tell you a story. A few months ago, one of our editors' bags disappeared."

Eric's voice drones in Manja's head. The story is terribly complicated. Try as she might to concentrate, her mind keeps wandering. With Eric leaving, what will become of her?

"So she thinks, that's strange," says Eric, "but doesn't say anything." "Who?" says Manja, feeling dizzy. She is getting hungry.

"Oh," says Eric, groaning, "It won't help to mention names." He breaks off and put his face in his hands.

Manja gingerly puts a hand on his tense shoulder. She is unable to help him. She is not astute, never has been, in intrigues and complicated matters. Eric looks up. The crickets chirp. He flinches. He breathes in deeply and sits up, continues with his tale.

"She goes to the director and reports him, and the director goes to investigate," he says and again Manja's mind disappears from his voice. Where does it go? Somewhere so cold, so distant and so soft that it does not occur to her to acknowledge it. She pulls at her innards, grasps vainly at herself to bring herself back here, to earth, beside this astonishingly conscious man, but the very effort prevents her from following his logic.

"So is it solved now?" she asks when there is a merciful silence.

Eric turns his hard, handsome gaze upon her and completely ignores her question.

"There is no future at *People for Learning*," he says, visibly resigning himself to Manja's failure to participate in his experience. "You should try to get onto one of the new teams at the dailies. They pay better, too. The way I see it," he concludes, "I can contribute at Hardy and Strutt. It is quite narrow-minded to believe that the need for profit should stand in the way of me producing good educational materials. And I'd like not to have to work on insecure, permanently renewable contracts forever," he says, "I'd like to be in a position at some stage to settle. Wouldn't you?"

Manja stares at the twinkling lights in the suburbs below. Each is star-shaped, with sharp rays that grow and diminish in length tremblingly, incessantly. She does not remember the lights ever being rent so with flickering. 'I need to eat something,' she thinks; but in her chest there is fear, panic almost.

"Do you also see those lights down there as long-rayed asterisks, like stars?" she says to Eric. It is as if this endless quivering in the darkness cut her very centre.

"No," he replies in some surprise, "I see them as dots. Lots of little dots. Possibly you should have your eyes looked at," he adds, "too much time in front of the computer. Shall we go?"

Manja, nauseous and blind from hunger, stumbles back onto the road behind Eric. He has ceased altogether to be communicative, which irritates her intensely. Back in her flat she gorges herself on bread with margarine and honey, until every cell in her body feels saturated by its own corporeality. This thankfully makes thoughts of the future entirely impossible. She burps, staring into space, concentrating on nothing but her own, heavy body, like a cow.

PART 2

MANJA LEVSKY'S FALL-OUT WITH HERSELF

Johannesburg - Cape Town, 1994-1995

University of Cape Town

"The Struggle is over. Now the work begins."

Eric's words. Manja holds the receiver. She accepts that, after all, Eric is the man with the crook who leads her. She has followed him for a long time now, not blindly, perhaps, but faithfully.

"I need time to think," she says, "but I am interested. I mean, yes. I would like to have the job. And I will -," she takes a breath, "- move to Cape Town to do it."

In the footsteps of Eric. Even now, she shares his vision. Is there another choice for her? Since his phone call, through the preparation for the first time in her life of a curriculum vitae; the photocopying of her best articles and the composition of a task by which Hardy and Strutt might assess her abilities - through all this she is dimly aware of a negative note, a discord humming somewhere in her fibres. Not alarmingly by any means, but nevertheless insistently, like the soft drip-drip of a faulty tap. It is easy to ignore it, after all, in the joyful prospect of moving not just to another city, but to the city which, though she has visited it briefly only twice in her life, enjoys a mythical status in her imagination.

She has an ancient memory of herself as a small child upon a wall that overlooks the moat of a medieval castle. Perhaps she has invented the scene over the passage of years. Yet there is an element which she knows is original, rough and true: the wind - which had sought to thrust her down the cliffside even then. More importantly, perhaps, her delight at its rude, tugging power. The temptation of yielding, of spreading out her arms to fly. Her godfather, who had escorted her along the path beneath trees that led to the castle and who now wanted nothing more than to sit himself down in the restaurant, rewarding her with a sweet treat and himself with a beer, had felt it was incumbent upon him to protect her from her own child-recklessness and innocence. Despite her protestations, he had insisted on holding onto her skirt, finally embracing her fearfully as she had teetered dangerously in the blustering currents - possibly even tempting their might?

The memory, if that is what it is, has served as an imprint, seeking to fill itself with more of the same. Manja feels it as a directive in the lungs. Perhaps they are truly the seat of her feelings - secret wings

that allow her to soar to a higher note, beyond the obtuse pulse of blood?

There was one place on earth where she once again recognised her lungs as her soul's centre. Her father had taken her to what was then still the Cape Province - once in winter for the July holidays and the next time over Christmas. The first time, Manja recalls, it rained. Nothing but grey wetness which her father cursed from morning till night throughout their stay, but which she drank in greedily, silently through all her pores.

But it was the second occasion, Manja remembers, that was decisive. She was already grown. They drove in what seemed like a moonscape, then her father stopped the car. The woman whom Oliver had brought along (a humorous History teacher who towered over both of them) dumped the gas cooker into the boot out of the wind, lit it and was preparing coffee. Manja had walked a little way away through scampering dassies and geckos of a peculiarly charred colour. She had stared at the relentless battle that took place between water, air and rock, as enormous waves seemed to crack the granite and then to explode with triumphant hissing sounds. She found shelter from the wind in a cleft of rocks and allowed her spirit to be sucked into the sluice that squelched below.

She became aware that her breathing was synchronous with that of this elemental wasteland. The water rose and sank together with her ribs. It seemed to her then that she might drop, fall: there would be no difference. Her consciousness was but a drop out of this huge, moving body - stray foam flung from its unbrooked, senseless volition. She felt convinced then that here was her home and partner.

Therefore, when she left school, she had informed her father that she would be going to Cape Town. She planned to hitchhike down to the coast with a friend and to earn her keep by playing Chopin and Scott Joplin in the sedate coffee bars she remembered having visited. If that failed, she would find work on a ship and sail who knows where in pursuit of her destiny, which had then still been synonymous with the Truth.

After all these years, Manja is not now bitter towards Oliver for having bluntly forbidden her to fulfil her plans in so rash a manner. The pressure upon her, however, to 'go south' has not lessened.

At last, an opportunity has presented itself. Although the job which she has accepted through Eric is only a six-month contract - with a

publishing company, moreover, whose power she is nothing if not wary of - there is no doubt in her mind that her move shall be permanent. Though she loves Johannesburg for its familiarity, it is too dusty, too waterless and far too steady in its climate. She lists these disadvantages to Oliver, not unaware of the fact that she is echoing her mother, using essentially the same manner of argument to justify her departure. And why not? Why should a body not proclaim its needs and why should a person not choose to follow these?

"And finally," declares Manja, "I need breadth of vision. There are too many tall trees and high buildings here. They prevent me from seeing further."

Oliver clamps a lid onto his bottle of homebrew and carefully sets it down.

"Quite strange," he grunts, filling the next bottle, "to suddenly be having such feelings about the city you have grown up in." Registering Manja's exasperated sigh, he adds, "Don't get me wrong. It is a very nice opportunity for you. I personally hope that it will lead to more. For your sake, by the way."

He falls silent and monitors the flow of the as yet only half-fermented syrup. The smell in the garage, where this procedure takes place, is sweet, malty.

"What I mean," he continues, "is that it is not high buildings that obstruct a person's vision. It doesn't help to blame architecture or trees for your own shortsightedness." He clears his throat loudly. Hurt and dejected, Manja removes her still unfamiliar glasses. She cannot get used to them. Why does Oliver cruelly blame her for her misfortune? As for his dissatisfaction with her state of employment - is it her fault that employers do not treat people decently, unwilling to pay in anything but bits, unsympathetic to illness or periodic incapacity, meanly refusing to sustain those who sustain them? The very term 'human resources' chills her. Oliver cannot understand. He has had a secure job his whole life long. He is a man. Does he even know that female teachers until very recently could lawfully be dismissed for pregnancy? Is he aware that bearing life - whether in the belly or the heart - is incompatible with any kind of formal employment? That most people and certainly most companies shy away from unique inner growth or creativity as from a monstrous poison? The working conditions which too many people (including Oliver) are prepared to accept - tiny, smelly,

dark offices; abusive or negligent behaviour by others towards them; meaningless routines - provide her with a strong sense that she will never allow anybody to steal her precious time - her life, her only one on earth - in exchange for no more than money. This is a conviction for which she is prepared to suffer and even to die.

She gets up from the step on which she has been sitting and looks at the boxes, freshly packed with her things, stacked against the wall. They contain most of her knick-knacks, almost all her books. Manja takes a shoebox labelled 'Chinese dolls'. She walks round the back of the house to the compost-trough behind the fruit trees. She sets the box down and tears away the plastic tape. It resists, she has to fetch a pair of scissors. Finally, she opens the cardboard flaps, exposing four tissue paper mummies. One by one she lays the dolls onto the bricked edge of the trough. There is only one boy. She remembers kissing and embracing her father for it repeatedly beside the Christmas tree. Such joy over a doll! His 'partner' is a little girl with a mischievous smile. Manja holds the girl doll in both hands. In the next instant she hurls her with all her might at the brick wall opposite the trough. There is a clack and the doll drops face-down onto pumpkin entrails and freshly cut grass. The boy doll gets off more lightly. Manja simply flings him directly onto the soft, fermenting heap. He stares up at the unblemished sky and smiles. Manja puts her foot, clad in a takkie, onto the faces of the third and fourth dolls. Surprisingly, the faces withstand her weight. Manja tramps destructively down from a height.

Without cleaning her footprints off their foreheads, Manja stuffs the dolls back into their cardboard coffin. She cannot reach the discarded two. She must descend into the pit. She finds the compost's heat comforting and does not hurry herself. She brushes sticky pumpkin fibres and pips off the boy's tunic and cap. Then she picks up the girl and blows grass from the disheveled fringe. The celluloid is cracked from the hairline. It runs over the temple into the side of the neck. Manja gazes with satisfaction at the doll's puckered little face. She pushes the dolls in on top of the others and closes the box. In the kitchen, she cuts a length of string and ties it with a knot, rather than a bow. There is a relieving emptiness around the heart. She can breathe again.

Chapter 17 Farewell

It is Friday evening. Manja pulls on her glittering pink and black lace pantihose. Over these she draws an extremely short, pink skirt - an old one from Cobus' mother. A tight-fitting black vest from the army surplus store and black pixie boots complete the outfit. Manja combs her freshly washed hair, which surrounds her head exuberantly like a dark brown hydrangea. She traces her eyes with Daisy Dupont kohl and dabs Dupont pink onto her lips. She knows that, for brief moments at a time, she can be compelling. If only her voice weren't so loud, her thoughts so forgetful of her outward appearance. She is in awe of women who (like her mother) possess grace, mystery and, most importantly, self-awareness. But, apart from her dark hair and eyes, she is much more her father's girl - a dumpy German, sorrily estranged from her better origins.

She stands on tiptoe in front of the mirror which Cobus has attached at a height to suit himself. Then her face sinks back to the bottom of the mirror and she watches her breath's veils as they settle soundlessly upon the surface. She breathes, consciously using her diaphragm, sighing open-mouthed. The veils thicken and whiten, like snow. She kisses the snow and feels its glassy coolness.

There is a knock. It is Simba, the Maths Page writer at P.F.L. He holds an enormous bottle of spirits with a picture of ships on it. Manja ushers him into her largely empty room decorated with balloons and crêpe paper cutout shapes with trailing ribbons. One after the other, her guests arrive. Roshnie, the History Page editor, brings a friend along with freshly made rotis and a tamarind sauce, gleaming richly in the candlelight. The Biology writer holds her boyfriend with one arm, a huge bunch of white gladioli in the other. Hanno arrives with his new girlfriend who sings for a living. She is even shorter than Manja with pronounced hips and closely cropped, pitch-black hair. She exudes so generous a warmth towards Manja as to cause her eyes to sting.

Some of the guests, including Jolanus, crowd through Cobus' room and gather on the balcony where they pass around a cigar-sized joint and declare themselves to be the wise men and women of Africa.

"Did you know," someone slurs comfortably, "that in the southern extremes of our continent there are people who are so intelligent and peaceful that their only pastime is to sit and think?"

A communal chuckle rolls over the balcony wall and into the night.

Manja recognises the words. She declines a drag in favour of the Vodka and orange juice which Simba has mixed for her. There is a downy calm in her head as she watches the people before her. Most of them she will not see again. Where are they all headed?

In Cobus' room, on his sofa, sit Theresa and the other cleaners who have been bold, or kind enough to come. One of the men has a bad eye. He sits on the edge of his seat, unhappily holding a mug of beer. The eye reaches out - who knows where? In the dim light, over the throbbing music, its misdirected glare holds no potency, only oddness. Manja smiles falsely at him and he smiles falsely back. The country's first democratic elections are not far off. They will all be voting for the first time in their lives.

Cobus is maternally tending to the cleaners. She can see it is doing no good. He treats Theresa and Nora, who are smartly dressed (Theresa in a purple African costume, Nora in sober brown crimplene), with a respect they clearly appreciate and find discomfiting at the same time. Theresa does not cease smiling charmingly at Cobus. She accepts the drink he offers her (Nora wants nothing at all), then reclines in the sofa without sinking and speaks intermittently to the oldest man among them, Amos, whose eyes are more than ever covered with a whitish film. Simba is the only person present who is able to speak to this stiff little clique in their mother tongue. Dutifully he does so, but they do not melt. Very soon they leave and Manja understands. They came to pay their respects. She shakes their hands one by one as she sees them out. Away they go, silently and, with the exception of Theresa, all in their declining years. To clean one's whole life long and be unembittered by the end of it. It seems a heroic achievement.

"Why so serious!" cries Jolanus. He dances wildly, kicking and nodding like a wildebeest. He pulls Manja into her room where people are thumping, bending and swivelling on the smooth parquet. Manja sets aside her glass. To have nothing. Hanno's girlfriend belly-dances. Her arms and hands spin slowly, her hip-basin revolves. Manja taps and dithers, embraces and sways with Han. Jolanus clasps her hands, lifts them up over Hanno's head, leading her away. Knots himself up in her

loose, undone, flowing, falling, sweeping the floor like a broom. Then
opposite Roshnie, twirling her arms before her face, coming down and
wiggling her shoulders, copying the beat. They drop like flowers from
trees. They are not. They do not. They breathe and pass by like the
wind. It is the wind of their beheading. Body-vapour. Light.

University of Cape Town

Eric's mother, Amanda Griffin, sits on her antique walnut chair with its salmon-pink upholstery. On her lap is a cushion and upon this lie her narrow, tanned hands. Her fingers pluck at the corners of the cushion, which is decorated with a quilted flower.

Eric wishes that she would not pluck so. His mother gazes at the pink cotton of the hibiscus, or whatever it is, then she drops her chin onto her breast in a gesture that pierces Eric. He cannot bear to see his mother suffer. Yet he feels not uncomfortably paralysed. He has no idea what he can do other than to wait. To watch and wait.

His father Raymond, grey-haired and downcast, sits beside him silently on the floral sofa. They face into the room, their backs to the light into which Amanda peers when she looks up. The wooden goose, whose wings move when one pulls the string hanging from its belly, flies motionlessly above Amanda in its position of eternal failure to make progress. To her right, an archway leads into the gloomy passage with its precious, wooden walls. The light bounces off the old pastelled child portraits of Eric and his brother. They form two rectangular, glassy lakes upon the wooden planes of wall to the left of the archway. Silence. They are a family of silence. Sometimes Eric dislikes them for this, but he never forgets that he feels nowhere else so safe from threats, dangers, and fears than in the company of his silent parents. Even now. Now more than ever, perhaps.

His mother, whose plucking has assumed a calm, knitting rhythm, lifts her neck almost imperceptibly. The impression of her delicacy tears him. She looks at Eric with dry eyes. A dry face. He searches for signs of anguish in her, but finds none. She blinks against the glare of the light that he knows lies like a shield upon the ocean. Something passes over her face - the faintest of shadows - and her plucking intensifies momentarily.

Eric looks at his watch.

"I'd better be off," he says and rises.

He steps over to Amanda who tilts her neck back expectantly to receive his kiss.

"I do my best," she says with authority, "and you do yours. We each of us have had to make new lives and it is not over."

"Yes," says Eric.

His father accompanies him into the entrance hall. He grips Eric's shoulder briefly with his strong, hard hands.

"She'll be fine," says Raymond.

"Yes," says Eric. "See you later. I'll bring the rest of my things then. Don't worry about coming out, Dad." He picks up his wind jacket on the yellowwood chest, and clicks shut the dark, heavily veneered door behind him.

He does not drive home. Home - is that what the garden cottage is, which he has been renting for the past fifteen months? He feels simultaneously fortunate and very lonely there. It is an almost absurdly pretty hideaway - a granny cottage at the bottom of a young couple's sweeping Constantia garden. He could not ask for greater peace or more natural beauty. Throughout the summer and autumn, roses in all shapes, colours and sizes have been exploding soundlessly all about him. Yet - or perhaps therefore - he feels stifled, a little as when, as a small boy, he was made to wear pressed white shirts buttoned to the top for Sunday school. Neither has Mau taken to the expansive surroundings as he had hoped she would. She seems lonely too. Lonely together is what they are here, in the shadow of a looming, famous mountain. He feels a pang at the thought of moving the cat again so soon. Will Mau accept his parents' setter, Ruby? And himself?

Housesitting for his parents in a cabin built for retirement, in an isolated suburb by the sea? He will have to leave for work much earlier than usual. Can he imagine himself staring out at that barren mirror of nothingness - the sea - each day? There was no question that he would do them this favour. It seemed ideal, what with Manja about to begin a new life here and being able to stay in his cottage during his parents' absence. He feels himself looking forward to seeing his old friend with pathetic eagerness. In a way, he is glad that his parents are leaving. It is doing him no good having to look after them, as he feels he is currently having to do. Perhaps, with them gone, the vice around his neck will lift, too.

As the road curves round and Kalk Bay Harbour presents itself, Eric takes an abrupt right turn, crosses the railway line and drives into the harbour area. He parks near the empty fish-cleaning stands, listens to the engine, becomes aware of the fumes he is unnecessarily emitting and switches it off. Everything has turned out so differently from what he had expected. Eric takes his cigarettes out of the cubbyhole and

lights one. He is unable to relax, though. He would hate to have Manja waiting for him at the airport. He watches the few people who are moving up or down the pier. The pier.

The smoke is making him dizzy. 'Karma,' thinks Eric, 'karma.' But it does not help. Something in him will not resign itself to comfort. He has become an only son. In a way, that is what he always was. But now the truth has caught up with them. 'Off that pier,' he thinks, 'Theo fell.' Washed off. I wash my hands of him.

The phrase pounces into Eric's mind quite involuntarily. Eric sits, shocked by himself and the perversity of his mental entrails. How stupid the mind is with its senseless, endless associations. The dizziness is becoming quite overwhelming. Eric opens the door and slumps towards the shop. He returns with a can of Coke, opens it with a crack. The liquid bubbles prick his mouth. It tastes like medicine. He scans the sea which lies, unstilled as ever, and becomes aware that he feels nothing. Nothing at all except an amazing and complete absence of strength.

Eric settles Manja at his cottage in Cecilia Forest with only the most cursory welcoming gestures. She knows about Theo, but they do not talk about it. He returns to his parents' house in Rocklands Road and unlocks the door softly. Passing through the entrance hall into the corridor he drops his bulging suitcase in the small guest bedroom leading off on the left. Then he hears his mother calling.

He passes the main bedroom where Raymond is already snoring. Eric walks through the sitting room and descends down the steep, ladder-like stairway that leads from an opening in the floor on the right. Amanda is reclining on her elbow on the single bed in the downstairs room. The bed is covered with papers. She gets up as Eric steps in and takes his hand.

"Eric," she says, "have a look at these."

She ushers him towards the bed, lets go of his hand and seats herself. There is no space left for Eric, so he remains standing.

"I haven't wanted you to see these too soon," says Amanda. "I did not want to upset you."

"Ma," says Eric. He is unable to say any more.

"Yes," replies Amanda. She picks up one of the papers and gives it to Eric.

"He was a very special boy," she says in a voice so unwavering that Eric looks at her in surprise. On the scrappy piece of paper are words in Theo's handwriting. Eric struggles to read them. The blood drums in his ears. He lifts his eyes from the page.

"Is this all his?" He gestures vaguely towards the bed.

Amanda nods. Eric steps forward. By the light of the shaded bulb beside the bed he notices sketches; a profusion of scribbles, shadows and lines gridded, knotted, swept together. He shifts some and sits down.

"Theo did an illustration for me once," he manages to say, "I was surprised how good it was. He obviously learnt something in the graphics design course. I didn't know he did so much. Did he do this here - in Cape Town?"

Amanda's mouth tightens. Is she trying not to cry?

"I had stowed this away till tonight," says Amanda. Again Eric is struck by the steadiness in her voice. "I think there must be something in these papers," she says slowly, firmly, "but I don't think it's for me to separate the - grain from the chaff. I don't know if one can ask a mother to do that. I'd have to become something else. Besides, there's stuff here that..." Her voice trails off as she takes a page and gazes at it. The page is filled with circles. Each circle contains a dreadful, black-eyed embryo.

"But you," continues Amanda, looking up, "could you - select? Make something of this? A tribute to Theo, something for us to remember him by."

Amanda stretches her neck towards him. Something is zooming her away from him, till she is a tiny speck. Then suddenly her face parachutes towards him and returns to its normal size. Eric looks at her. Her apricot hair matches the lampshade. He knows his mother is speaking to him, but there is no sound.

"You're in a state of shock," he then hears Amanda say, "I am sorry, my boy."

She takes his hand, pats it, and then stops. She looks into his face. She goes right in, like a bird about to feed its young.

"Eric?" she says.

"No," he blurts out, "I mean, no." Where is 'yes'? He wants to say 'yes'. He looks for 'yes' in his head, his mouth, his heart. It is not

there. "No," he murmurs, submitting. He feels his face contorting as if someone were squeezing it into a small bag. Some drops drop out. His only moisture. What he fears, more than anything, happens. She cries. He puts his arm mechanically around her. Her sobs pulse through her back.

"Poor boy," he hears, "poor boy."

Which one does she mean?

Amanda gathers herself.

"I am sorry," she says, "I realise that I ought to have prepared you for this. I did not know, Eric - " she hesitates, then goes on: "that you - were still so sore." Her tears well again, but she dries them quickly and efficiently, as though they were no more than water from a fallen vase. She blows her nose delicately.

"Ma," says Eric, relieved that her crying has stopped, "Please. I have to tell you I can't do this. It's not that I don't want to. Maybe I don't want to. But I also can't."

Amanda regards him searchingly. Her head against his shoulder has rubbed up her dry hair. She looks disheveled, burst, somehow. Eric feels his dislike for Theo intensify abruptly. It was not enough in his life to wound the family. By dying, he ensured they would all out-suffer him. What a coward he was. What have they done to deserve this? "Why did Theo not take responsibility for his life?" Eric blurts out, "I mean, what is this shit?"

He waves his hand over the bed. He aims too low and accidentally brushes some of the papers directly, pushing them up against one another. They crackle and stay obstinately in the air.

His mother looks at him wide-eyed. "Eric," she says, but she cannot stop him.

"You have no idea," he says, "you and Dad have no idea how difficult a life like mine is."

"Eric," says Amanda.

"Yes," says Eric, "listen to me for once."

"Eric!" says Amanda.

"In your day," he presses on fitfully, "you found a position and stayed there. Like Dad. Let me tell you, it's not like that anymore. Do you know what it is like?" he cries. "Nothing is certain! You have to be on guard period. It's so relentless. I mean, it's so easy to die!"

Amanda stares at him through her neat, honey-coloured eyes. Streaks of green eyeliner mar her cheeks. The thought flits across his mind that she looks like an old rag doll. In the same instant his heart seems to freeze. Is this what he has become? A man without love? Without compassion?

He gets up and opens the huge sliding door. The cold wind darts in and his mother hugs herself. She turns and gathers the papers. Slowly, calmly she collects them, snatching them from the draft that is ruffling them.

"Well," she says finally, when she has them all in a pile on her lap. Her voice is obstructed by phlegm. She clears her throat. How self-possessed she is. "I can't say I'm not shocked," she declares hoarsely, nevertheless in a rather queenly manner, "I honestly didn't know you felt such bitterness in your heart towards your brother."

Of course she is shocked. There must be no sign that he is a feeling, suffering creature too. He must stand up straight, no matter from where the wind blows. Anger, outrage, grief, disappointment - these are not for him. He must be as solid and consistent as his brother was erratic and labile.

"Your brother," says Amanda, "who cannot hurt you ever again. We all know he was difficult - or different. Difficult and different. I know you thought he was irresponsible. He did cause us a lot of worry. He was not exactly thoughtful. He was not considerate..." Her voice weakens as she begins to cry again. "I can't believe," she wails, her voice high, "that I am having to defend Theo. Against you! This is sacrilege!"

"Sacrilege. Mother, please," Eric replies through tight lips. He has had enough of this emotionality. Amanda must see him, too, for once, for what he is. "Theo chose to fail," he continues, "Theo chose," he says, "to be a good-for-nothing. I choose to do what I do. That is the difference between people."

Amanda looks at him fearfully. She dabs her eyes with a tissue. "Don't expect me, Eric," she says nasally and rather forcefully, for her, "to congratulate you for that kind of hardness. If that is what you think it means to be a man - go ahead. I can't stop you. But you are wrong. Never mind all your other qualities. They shrink to nothing when I hear you speak like this! I think you are wrong."

Has she ever spoken so harshly? He buckles. Can he endure such a terrible reproach, indeed it is a threat, from her? He is being exiled. "You," says Amanda, "with your meditation and your reading. You have always been superior to Dad and me. Us all. We are thankful for you. You are our lucky omen, our star. We love you, always have. What's happened? Are you jealous because we do not have to worry about you? Is that what this is? How can you blame me for what Theo was? Or blame him? People suffer their fates, it is not easy, no one's life is easy. You are condemning my dead child. You, the brother! Theo was - he is also my child!"

She is right. Never before has he had less faith in life, his life. He is lost. The wind is freezing his heart. It is a wearying cold, a slow petrification.

"I don't know, Eric," says his mother, "I know it has been a difficult time for you. For you."

She drops her head to the pile that she is cradling against her breast and weeps.

His mother. The weakest link. She cannot distinguish between categories, for her all is one and the same. Therefore - yes, his father is right - therefore they must take care not to hurt her. It is clearer than ever: in feminine weakness there lies a terrible power which only fools would dare to disobey. His father's words, only once or twice, but unforgettable from his youth. Through birth, man is exiled from mystery, only forever to try to regain entrance to it. Here she sits: defenceless, yet defending, in love alike with best and worst. Mystery incarnate. Without this force inside this tearfulness no promise could unfold, no seed could pass beyond its dreams and into bodied being. Nor without this carriage could he be.

"I know I must take Theo's passing," says Amanda, "as a message." She looks at him. "I am not strong enough to take it any other way. I would have thought you'd be the first to understand that."

Eric stands before her.

"I understand, Ma," he says, "I do."

"Perhaps you are right," she replies, "it is me who must go through these, not you."

"No," says Eric anxiously, suddenly feeling clear, "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Why not?" Amanda says warily, turning aside as he reaches out his hand.

"It would not be good for you, Mother," he says smoothly. He means it. Once again his eyes perceive her prettiness, her genuine vulnerability. In his heart he feels, if not yet warmth, at least the comfort of familiarity.

"I am sorry, Ma," he says at last, "for my selfishness. I have been under a lot of strain."

The caution in her eyes gives way to admiration. It is a gaze he is not sure he respects, but he cannot resist its nourishment.

"Thank you for apologising," she replies, not entirely without haughtiness, "it is a strong man who can admit his faults. Not all are as fortunate," she adds, "as you."

Eric takes the limp bundle out of his mother's arms. Is a stone fortunate for not feeling? A pool for swallowing the waterfall? He feels a brief, deep ache. A man is not what he wants to be, but what he must be. Eric is a swallower, an organiser, a tidier of others' messes - himself unradiant and forever mute.

"There are messages in there," Amanda says.

"I know," Eric re-assures her.

It is three weeks after Easter. Manja has lain awake for some time. In Eric's bed, under his duvet. It was washed before she moved into his cottage, but still it is inhabited by his smell. She has never been so close to Eric's smell before. His smoking, which is present here too, of course, has always masked it. It is a peculiarly herby, though unmistakably manly smell. The kind of smell that on some mute, stupid level makes her feel safe.

For how many years now has she relied on Eric? Is this her destiny - to be his helpmeet, wherever he goes? He has never asked for anything in return, their agreement has always been professional. The thought of being close - physically close - to Eric has simply never entered Manja's mind. Yet here she is, in his house, in his bed. Free to use his car, even. She is not put off by the smell of old smoke. It is a part of all of this. A part of him.

Manja's eyes rest on the wooden slats of the wall. They are more interesting to her than Eric's pictures. Into an invisible gap between two panels a tendril has come through. Soft, barely green in its infancy. What immense support must it enjoy from the mother plant, pushing it through unhurried, unrelentingly, till it has entered the human abode?

Through the small window, only green is to be seen. 'Paradise,' thinks Manja. She feels almost pained to be so enclosed, so embraced by green. There is something about the lushness here, the European wood and fern, that suffuses her heart with an aching weight. The dark cool of the garden, so much growth, such fragrance. She cannot stay here for too long. She needs an open plain. A harder ground.

At half past nine the phone rings. It is Eric.

"Why don't you come over? We can vote here. There won't be such bad queues here."

She had forgotten. It is voting day today. The excitement she knows she might once have felt hovers on the horizon of her heart, a creature grazing in the distance.

"So strange," she replies, "I am not even excited."

There is a brief pause. He is planning a tactful reply.

"It is a very important day," he declares, articulating the words carefully.

"I know," she says.

Who is Eric? What is Eric? What is she doing here, in his house, among his things? She feels momentarily panic-stricken.

"Yes, I suppose I can come," she says, "When do you want me to be there?"

Again a pause.

"If you don't want to, you must just say so."

"No," she says, "I don't want to go alone."

How can she live through this day on her own, after all? As it is, she feels disappointed and ashamed not to be part of a large, happy crowd. Yet paradoxically, she feels trapped. Where is there for her to run? Nowhere in this dark, lush, blooming jungle certainly.

"I'll first have a shower," she replies, "and breakfast."

It is a relief to list these mundane activities. A relief to enact them. Even insects clean themselves when night's darkness passes, all creatures break the fast. Between the chirrups of a nosy thrush her spoon clinks in the bowl.

When Manja and Eric arrive at the village Yacht Club, there is a queue of about ten people. Manja cannot deny a certain disgust with herself. What has happened? Where is the Struggle? Here she is, voting at a yacht club of all places, together with a bunch of dowdily dressed people she has never seen in her life before. What are Willem and Gila doing, wherever they are now? Hanno? Jolanus? Not that she misses these people from her past. She has never been particularly attached to anybody. She belongs to places, not to people.

At the same time, there must be something unperceived that is today responsible for her - is it indifference? Meanness? Is this not what she worked towards? What she wanted, above all? It must be meanness: she is not permitting herself happiness. She does not deserve it. There has not been a revolution after all and the reason is that they - she - did not fight hard enough. A real revolution would surely put an end to the pedantry of voting.

"I'm thinking of that graffito," she tells Eric, perversely relishing the bitterness that is coursing in her veins, "which says if voting could change the system it would be illegal." Before Eric has a chance to reply, she rubs it in: "You know. Plus ça change, plus c'est

la même chose. The French know that better than anyone else, after all."

Eric cuts her down to size as she had hoped he would.

"Did you see the news last night?" he says. "People are literally staking out their ground with spades. Singing, dancing while doing so. This is a new beginning for us all." He speaks softly, as if afraid that by-standers might hear him. Then he adds, horribly gently, "Why don't you go home if you don't want to vote?"

Manja is instantaneously overcome with guilt and humiliation. What fascist tendencies are running through her? Why this sourness about the new democracy that is about to be born? No, she is nothing, she cannot think, she cannot see. She is just a stupid woman who has no clarity and will forever be unable to do anything that requires straightforward, outward-directed thinking. She does not even know there is a world out there. No, she did not watch the news. Thank god for Eric. She will follow him.

"I still don't know who to vote for," says a remarkably innocent-looking man standing behind her. "I can't believe it. This is such a big day and I don't know who I should vote for."

His voice is high and nervous. He does not use his hands to speak. He holds them close to his sides, like a schoolboy.

"There's so many parties," he says.

The man's eyebrows are a caricature of anxiety. Like two fingers they point from the outer corners above his eyes upward, in the direction of the answer he is clearly trying his best to glimpse.

"I mean," he says, finding a vaguely sympathetic listener in Manja, "one doesn't want to vote for the winner. That takes all the fun out of it, if you know what I mean."

"But the winner in this province," Manja ventures to reply, "will not be the same as the winner overall."

The man looks at her blankly. "Yes, of course," he says, adding, "No. I'm in a state. I don't know what to do!"

The other people in the quickly diminishing queue are smiling. A row of children, each waiting to receive a gold star from their teacher. Those who emerge from the clubhouse have the sheepish look of people who have just been praised. Manja becomes ever angrier with herself for these thoughts. 'How is it possible,' she thinks, 'for me to be so churlish? What is happening to me?'

In the booth, she reads through the list of names, taking note of as many as she can. Is the voting scroll anything than just another piece of junk mail from the supermarket, advertising the best wares for the lowest prices? She tries consciously to rein in what she feels is a sudden and dangerous fatalism. She feels smaller than she remembers having felt before, more powerless than ever. She is required to say 'yes' to a question that she answered for herself already, long ago. In a tiny way, she was part of the process that made it possible for everyone to answer this question freely now, in the open. That done, however, surely she must move on? Where to, though, now?

Her pencil hovers beside the only visually appealing image on the sheet: a striped, exotic shell. It is the PAC logo - the pitch-black shell is really Africa with yellow lines radiating round, curling up finally in the shell's heart (rather beside the point, on the west coast of the continent, as it happens).

If only there were such a shell. She would put it to her ear and close her eyes.

With a beating heart and trembling hand, Manja fills in the block beside the logo with delicate, wavy lines.

The empty blocks beside the other parties are like mouths, open in shock. What has she done? Are there no erasers? The blood has drained out of Manja. She has spoiled her first vote. She will be punished for this impertinent act of faithlessness, of pure stupidity.

Suppressing her breath, which wants to voice itself, she moves onto the next sheet, upon which the candidates compete for provincial control. Battered by her own idiocy, she finds what has always looked to her like an ox wagon wheel, pushed by a shadow, beside a spear and shield. A clumsy logo, without a hint of artistry. Her cross is crooked, its lines shiver, but once it is out she feels ecstasy. Yes!

The feeling dies almost instantaneously. How dare she lie so to herself. She is voting for the ANC because in this province they are still the losers. She is by her very nature unable to give her support to - the phrase comes to her with all its bitterness: those on top. She returns to the paper for the national vote and rapidly places a cross in every box. The action calms her. A cross also over the block that is dark with its pencilled tune.

Eric is waiting for her outside. He looks at her closely, but says nothing. His eyes reveal excitement. He is happy, she can see. For him

this ritual is a form of proof. Proof of what, though? That the nameless crosses of the people will at last be counted? Will that lighten anybody's load?

The man with the dramatic eyebrows steps out of the yacht club with Manja.

"I voted for the Soccer Party," he says, sounding not displeased.

"Let's hope this isn't all a big balls-up!"

He has lost none of his stiffness: only his eyebrows seem to speak. They have assumed a more sedate angle.

Manja chuckles and retorts, "Well done! White and black get kicked around together. Better to play fair."

The man does not hear her. He is already striding off with a gait far younger than his face.

"Come on," says Eric, touching her arm before she can make further inappropriate remarks, "let's go."

When Manja follows Eric into the charming log cabin that is his parents' retirement house, he offers her a huge spliff of Malawi Cob. Perhaps it will be good for her to fumigate her innards with this peace pipe's piquant vapour. To initiate this, the first day of being allowed to be African, with a dry, burning, airy thing rather than with sappy ferment. Literally a letting off of steam. She is not used to smoking, however, and overdoes it. When the newspapers speak of 'An Outbreak of Peace' the next morning, she dimly comprehends: lying upon Eric's mattress in the forest cottage, she can hardly lift a limb. She is ash. Lead. All about her, the country seems to be in a daze, as if blissfully dead. She is vaguely aware that around her, around it, winners and losers alike dance in their different shoes upon the radio waves, the television screen.

The winter provides a welcome shroud of virtually permanent mist. Manja hardly emerges from her hideout. She is a snake in its hole - blind, moulting, a new skin growing underneath, inside the old.

She is expected to do research for the book that she is writing for Hardy and Strutt, but falls prey to a dangerous degree of procrastination. She is powerless against it. Something has her in its grip, something that is making her lame and unable to act.

She resolves each evening to rise early in the morning and to take a walk in the forest, but when she wakes the gloom in the cottage and the

absorbing quality of the surrounding greenery seems to suck all the strength from her. She lies for hours, motionless, sometimes weeping without knowing why, before she finally rises towards noon. Heavy with the spirit of a mountain in whose flank she now resides - a mountain which one cannot but respect, but which she neither knows nor cares for.

She reads voraciously, and knits and crochets obsessively, in this way using up all of Amanda Griffin's leftover bits of wool. It is a pleasant surprise for Manja to discover that needlecraft is of astonishing therapeutic value to her period pain, which no pill has succeeded in soothing over the years. The rearing spasms with their rows of teeth in her womb seem to fall under a spell by the action of her hands - such that these wordless days of female activity become positively peaceful. Nevertheless, she wonders despite her new acceptance of the process how she might be able to hold onto a permanent position in the world if she were ever offered it. What kind of employer would tolerate such a costly weakness - a person who takes leave each month? A person wholly inconsistent in strength, because their very centre bleeds?

As the months pass by, Manja is shocked to discover that she is beginning to harbour fantasies in which she is looked after by - yes, it is Eric. She does nothing to stop these fantasies, however. On the contrary. They have a frighteningly seductive power.

The fact is, she feels lost, uprooted without familiar surroundings, without her 'things'. She had imagined herself to be an adventurous spirit, embracing the new South Africa together with her own destiny in the south - empty-handed, perhaps, but ready for new challenges. Now, here she is, hiding in exotic foliage and roses, knitting potholders and waiting for a man to rescue her. Worse, he is not even a man she loves. At times she is aware that she blames, indeed comes close to despising, him for her own lack of love. To conquer these deadly poisons, she looks after his place and his things as a wife might, as if they were her own. And they are, are they not, in a way?

She has hung Jolanus' rain-director in the main room, thus granting the soberly conclusive air of the cottage a breath, a frown, a question mark. In short, the rain-director is completely out of place here. The cottage has only one room, really, since the place with the

mattress is nothing more than a niche with a small window to let light in. If there were light. Upon Eric's bookshelf, where his monkeys used to be and the wire saxophone still lies (she cannot get it to stay up), *Death and the Maiden* stands upright. Manja plays it frequently now on Eric's record player, enjoying her self-indulgence. It soothes what would otherwise be grief over the absence of a piano.

On her birthday, which falls on a day during this twilighty period in her life, Eric delivers a bunch of sunset-coloured roses before rushing off to work and Manja bakes her favourite cake - a traditional *Apfelkuchen* according to her grandmother's recipe - in his tiny oven. When it has cooled and stands covered in icing snow, she balances it on the shelf beside the old, pink record cover and lights a candle in celebration not of herself, but for its own sake, for light.

The candle burns down slowly, consuming itself as the hours go by, beside the saffron explosion of roses, and the cake glows pale yellow as Manja, curled up on a beanbag, swims with the bows as they cross and re-cross the quivering strings.

It occurs to her that she is content to be alone, that it is in truth her natural state. There is no place for her in the world. She could die and no one would know the difference. Dispensable, replaceable. Let it be - so long as she may be washed in music and light. Even an amoeba seeks god in this way, going so far as to divide itself when it is at its happiest. She will cut cake for whomever Eric brings along tonight.

Chapter 20 Common Ground

June has passed with cold, heavy rains and given way to July. Manja has not progressed in her work. The textbook series for Hardy and Strutt is a monumental project in that it aims to cover all the core subject fields with reference to a single theme - 'Common Ground'.

What does this mean? The Government of National Unity is at this very moment trying to find it. Manja sits at her desk and stares into space. Then she gets up and steps out of the door of Eric's granny cottage. The garden sweeps up through huge rosemary and fennel bushes, past a cluster of spiky-looking trees with silverblue leaves, to an extensive rose garden which Manja has been too shy thus far to visit.

The property - the ground, the fundament - belongs to a Johannesburg businessman in the process of trying to bring his business to Cape Town. His wife, child and baby, whom Manja has not met and who, she has been told, usually reside here, seem to spend most of their time in Darling with the wife's parents.

The house is kept clean by an elderly domestic worker who lives in a room, with what must be a magnificent view, attached to the main house; while a man named Maxwell, who lives in a dark hut just outside the front gate, tends the garden.

Manja can see Maxwell's head popping up above the roses at irregular intervals. Common ground. Is this unruffled paradise Maxwell's ground? Hers? *Janee*, Yesno.

The sun is shining. Manja pulls off her slippers and socks and walks barefoot on the soft, green lawn. It seems to her that she has never walked on such soft grass. She is in a sanctuary, a sanatorium. A haven, cut off almost completely from the world. From the violence, no longer called 'Struggle', but 'crime', that set in again shortly after the election. Cut off from the thrashing talk of a new constitution. A new constitution. Why does it all seem so far away? How is it that she is here, as if catapulted into another space, back to Europe, as it seems? Something is happening to her that she is suspicious of, yet she cannot deny that the moisture in the leafy vegetable bodies all about is deeply nourishing to the point of inducing a sensation of sleep even while she is walking. Yet the garden is real. This is earth. Here treads Maxwell with his shears. He greets respectfully.

"This is such a beautiful garden," says Manja. She wants to please him. Maxwell has taken off his cap. Sweat glistens on his brow. She notices that his toffee-coloured skin is speckled with a profusion of round, neat, chocolatey freckles. The sight of the freckles makes her feel inexplicably happy. His eyes are not particularly dark. Like molten bronze they glow.

"It's too much work," he replies, "there's no one here to help me." Manja is incredulous and this affirms him.

"I do all of this," he says, opening his arm in a round gesture, "once a week is a man he comes to help me. It's too much work for one."

"It is the most beautiful garden I have ever seen," says Manja, smiling warmly.

Maxwell dons his cap and returns to his work, repeating his lament, but grinning. How can he not? He is a god in this universe. Kissed each day by roses of every colour. She hovers, feeling him wait for her to go. She sees the strings in his excellent brown arms as he clips and cuts. She goes up to him.

"I can help you," she says.

Maxwell laughs. He shakes his head. He thinks she is joking.

"Look at me," insists Manja, "I'm struggling to do the work I must do. Maybe, if I did some gardening, it would help. I have to write a book for school children, you know, using the idea of 'Common Ground'."

Maxwell is looking at her, but he has no interest in following her meaning.

"No," he says, smiling, "it is too much work."

Manja feels patronised. "Why can't I help you?" she says indignantly, "What is this? It is our common ground. We both live here. We both work here."

He knows what she means. But still he gazes at her as if she were a child, his daughter, almost, though he cannot be much older than she. He reaches out a hand and touches her shoulder; he indicates that she must go. Is he entirely unable to take her seriously?

"You must do your work," he says.

She trots away, misunderstood and scolded. She must do her work. What is her work? To consider her work is a terrifying prospect.

Emerging from the herb terrace, Manja turns left to where the lawn disappears in favour of stony earth. This is a neglected part of the garden. Behind some scraggly bushes lie stray sheets of asbestos and a

few iron rods. Here, too, is the compost heap, close to the high fence topped by a double row of barbed loops.

She walks along the fence to the corner, then ascends the slope, past a mulberry and a handsome dark-leafed tree of which she does not know the name, towards Eric's - or is it hers? or the owner's? - cottage.

Whoever's it is, it is a gloomy, though also peculiarly quaint place. Quaint from the outside, depressing inside. A house for a picture book, never to be entered.

The desk is piled up with papers Manja has gathered during the past months - clippings and books about sorely disputed areas in the country both past and present. She has come across two articles by Willem Strydom, her one-time housemate whose simplistic Marxist sentiments never really resonated with her. His words linger sympathetically, however, upon small, displaced communities in the Karoo and Kosi Bay as he describes their battle for their 'Ground' against conservationists and developers alike.

Willem spoke to these people. He walked with the poor driving their cattle, listened to their mumbles as they picked mussels from the rocks. Set between black and white photographs of men standing in fish kraals, Willem quotes their utterances:

"What scares me," says an old fish herder, "is that they will bring in dangerous animals to kill us one by one. Animals like pythons."

Willem describes how both conservationists and developers (with the best will in the world, armed with sophisticated compromises) encroach upon the fish herder's land and water. 'Assimilating him in the digestive process,' thinks Manja.

Manja herself is expected to approach 'real life people' in order to do her work. She is expected to choose a group, then to select individuals from it and to weave their words into the task before her. A tribute to the new South Africa, the intention being to imbue the writers' texts with hitherto unconsidered tone and colour. The other writers have already begun with this novel method. At the last team meeting, they both produced 'raw data' gathered from 'informants' from the 'grass roots'. Manja shudders. The prospect of targeting 'informants' to gather 'data' from separate mouths glittering with spit and tongue and tooth is simply terrifying. She cannot imagine ever sitting opposite an 'informant'. The very word is unbearable to her. As if what passes over people's lips is information! As if what people say is not all lies!

Willem writes:

"The dunes were scorchingly hot. We refreshed ourselves from fruit trees laden with berries which were cool, purple and sweet."

As ever, Willem's words provoke her. Hot, laden, purple, sweet - this is not 'data'. Viciously, she scribbles into the magazine, over the grey expanse of a photographed beach. 'Lies!'

She writes more and as she does so, her fear of and disgust with the imperatives that appear to rule her life flow away into the grey paper sand of the beach beneath. She shifts the marks this way and that, feeling her way towards what with increasing clarity she is convinced is the truth - the truth not of 'data', or 'information', but of - pythons. Certainty of death. The truth of lies.

Lies

like berries on trees
to make life bearable,
buryable. Ox-heavy lies
- axes to beat other lies.
Lies swarming like fish,
against life and death.

Lies like Truth -
thumped,

scaled, gutted, butterflied.

There are unburied animal tales, I hear them
calling - finned, winged, fugitive as air.

An old fish herder
fears python. What is
that herder's fear but a
hot story, lying laden,
purple, bitter -
possible to bear?

I want to deal in fish and
berries. I want to herd axes
and bury myself under heaps
of hot, heaps of purple,
pregnant, pungent,
fishy, scaly
lies.

Still holding her pen, gazing lovingly at her word-sculpture, Manja picks up the receiver of the telephone on the desk and dials. A woman with a no-nonsense voice is at the other end.

"Cape of Good Hope Nature Reserve," she says.

Manja introduces herself and her work nervously. No matter how convinced she may be of herself in private, somehow there is a galaxy to be crossed whenever she must deal with others.

"I want to find out," she says, "would it be possible to speak with the people who work in your reserve? I am looking for stories," she says.

"Stories?"

"Yes. About the land, the plants that grow, and animals. There are animals there, aren't there? Wind, and fires that happened. How do people feel," she says, "about the wind and fires?"

'Where are we, after all?' she thinks, 'The world does not just consist of people and their politics.'

The woman at the other end is silent.

"I mean the lives of the people," stammers Manja, "who have been there a long time."

"Is it the workers you want?" says the woman, "I'm sure they'd be happy to speak to you. I can give you a list of their names and phone numbers."

"Thank you, yes."

"We have a few who are about to retire. Do you want them as well?"

"Yes, please."

That evening, when Eric drops in after work and says, "How's it going?" she is able, for the first time since her arrival to say, "Well. Very Well."

Eric, sitting on the floor opposite her, looks at her in surprise.

"I've finally found a starting point for my work. I think I'm plucking up the courage to do what you've wanted me to do. I've arranged an interview."

"Excellent!" says Eric. He comes forward - not to hug her, surely? She backs off.

"There's just one thing," she says.

"What's that?" he replies. He has risen and is prodding Jolanus' rain-director with what seems like irritation.

"I don't belong here," says Manja, "I can't work here. I can't live here."

"You don't belong here," Eric echoes coldly.

"I had a chat with Maxwell today," says Manja, "and I realised that this house and this garden cannot ever be 'common ground'. It's private. Deprived of commonness. I don't want to stay here anymore. The fence is much too high."

"So?"

"Can I swop with you?" she says.

"Swop with me?"

"I want to stay where it's open."

"I'm sorry, I don't get your logic, Manja. My parents' house is a private house, I'm warning you," he says sarcastically

"But at least I'll be able to see," replies Manja. "I can't see here. There's too many trees."

Eric laughs despite himself.

"Look. As long as you feed Ruby and do all that's necessary, I actually think it's not a bad idea at all. You'll be closer to your informants - "

The word chills Manja every time.

"And as for me and Mau, I shall speak for her, we are delighted. It is very bleak out there. Basically treeless," he adds.

"I'm so relieved," replies Manja, "I need some bleakness. If you grow up on the highveld, a forest such as this comes as quite a shock."

Chapter 21 Gabriel Wasserfall

Manja's first interview is with the retired lighthouse keeper from Cape Point. It is evident from her telephone conversation with him that he is not really clear about what she wants. She finds his little apartment, one of countless tenement houses in the township Ocean View. She has to knock several times before the door opens.

"I want to speak to Gabriel Wasserfall, I have an appointment with him for now," she says in Afrikaans to a gnome-sized, grumpy-looking man who unlocks the door and peers at her suspiciously.

"I am he," the man replies. He neither opens the door for her, nor does he say any more.

"Can I come in?" she says boldly and enters.

He speaks, but she cannot make out his words. Somewhere, vague meanings crystallise. She realises with horror that she cannot understand this man's language. Somehow or another, he communicates to her that she has come too early.

A primitive instinct makes her defensive, but then she apologises and says, "Can I but come again at half eleven?" She knows that her face is contorted by anxiety.

Gabriel Wasserfall nods. His body seems light as a child's. His face, too, beneath the deep wrinkles, possesses a curious purity.

Manja spends half an hour driving around the township. Some of the roads between the tenements are untarred and so narrow that the car almost scrapes against the makeshift fences. Each front door is identical, reached by a short, straight footpath between spinach, pelargoniums, or simply stony sand. The car must thread its way between clusters of playing children and remarkably inert dogs. The streets, including the main thoroughfares, are cluttered with bricks, which seems odd here. They remind her of the days of battle she experienced at the university. Heart in hand, thrust and run. How many heavy, stony hearts did she see being flung? And now? Fortunately, she thinks, Eric's car is old and rickety. It fits perfectly into this humble landscape and will arouse neither suspicion nor envy.

She rolls down a slope past a pale yellow church. Its steeple stabs the air; nothing seems to grow in its immediate vicinity. She veers left and exits the township, following a sign which reads 'Scarborough'. After a short distance she pulls over to watch some surfers in the

waves, of which there are not many today. The sea is breathing without breaking. The surfers lie on their boards, rocking to and fro. Common ground. The words are beginning to exert an unpleasant pressure in her mind. Eric's brother Theo's feet appear incongruously in her mind, black with dirt, but ethereal - clean by virtue of their abstraction from his body. One of the surfers paddles out. His intention appears paltry, his movements clownish. The sea heaves up as he gains a footing on his launch pad. His hopes are driven shoreward by a foamless swell, leaving him to settle himself, small and black, in the distance. No catch this time: the soul will remain hungry. Theo's feet have gone. On the other side of the beach, on a rocky promontory, stand buildings. Did Gabriel Wasserfall spend his days in one of these? What does it mean to be a lighthouse keeper? What does one do morning, afternoon and night, day after day alone in a tower or house on the rocks? What is her aim in speaking to him? 'Lie to me' - is that what she should say? What does she want from him, after all?

"I'm sorry I came early," she begins their second meeting, "It must have been a misunderstanding."

Meneer Wasserfall offers a response neither by way of word nor gesture. She stands uncertainly before him and he waves for her to seat herself upon an ancient settee. He himself sits down opposite her on a hard school chair.

The yellow light of the winter morning splinters through ragged lace curtains from the window behind his head. The room is dark and cold, pierced by those shafts of light.

Manja rubs her hands. Meneer Wasserfall is waiting for her to say something. How artificial this encounter is! Is this how she is now to overcome their 'separate development' in the past?

"In my book for school children," she begins, aware of how English her Afrikaans sounds, as if she were picking up each word between her thumb and forefinger and sniffing it. She pushes harder, making her tongue, teeth, and throat work. "I want to use stories from people like yourself. I want to make exercises on stories I don't know. New stories. You know." She uses the formal 'u'. She wants to say, 'Stories to inspire the children'. But she cannot think of a colloquial correct word for 'inspire'.

"Om die kinders te inspireer," she says.

Meneer Wasserfall cocks his head. His hair is uncombed, unruly. Why does everything about him, even his unwashed smell, carry such authority? He looks lovable and intimidating at the same time. She stammers, searching for words. She is not making it easy for Meneer Wasserfall to understand her. Eventually she sits back. It is his turn now.

"I don't know if I can help Mevrouw," he says. "Mevrouw must but ask questions."

His words are rocks. Bits of wood that he spits out, clad in foam. It takes Manja several seconds to get past the rock, the wood and the foam to his meaning.

"Your work?" she says, "You were the lighthouse keeper at Cape Point?"

"I worked there, yes," says Meneer Wasserfall, "there at the fire tower. But I was only a boytjie was what I used to be. In those days it was only a witman for that work. Driving a lorry. Then it came to pass the bruinmense also, and when they see, the next one comes. And now a darkie one day, even today. A person can see it, after all."

Manja strains. His words are not merely made of sound. They are substantial entities, things which he has to wrench from his palate, scrape from the sides of his cheeks, vomit up past moist membranes, squeezing them through an obstructive gullet into and then out of the mouth.

"So what did you do there?" she asks, mimicking the heaviness of his speech.

Gradually she learns that he worked as a 'handlanger' or helper for the upkeep of the two working lighthouses at Slangkop, not far from here, and Cape Point. But that is immaterial, the chance details of a life. If Manja struggles to hold onto names, dates, a semblance of order which may help her to place, indeed to grasp and unify, the man's mundane, fragmentary narrative, then that is because something about Meneer Wasserfall's person - is it a music beneath his speech? - is pulling her far, far away from such an order - straight onto the cliffs and from there into the sea. Does he know what he is doing to her? She stares at him, sitting between rocks. Without warning, he plunges down, and she with him, into a tiny, wooden boat flung left and right, forward and back by the terrible toss of his voice. Meneer Wasserfall's words swell beneath the prow. Into his spit a skipper leaps and drowns.

Three more men are in the boat, surging back and forth between the cliffs upon which Gabriel Wasserfall stands, vainly hurling rope towards them. Then the boat's ribs break between his teeth and its occupants flail as he gnashes. Beaten by his breath, stuck between his teeth they wait shivering until, at length, his tongue propels them one by one, all three away by helicopter.

"That was the first time I saw the sea," says Meneer Wasserfall, "that I saw such a thing. It happened much in my time, ja."

What a noisy, spitting man he is. He still goes out to fish, his backside hard with cold from the hard rock as he stares into the eternal body of salt water for an entire day before returning to his bed. Clearly he cannot help himself. Nor can she help hearing him. She feels strangely inspired - as if the power he poured into her, by dint of her unwavering attention, relieved her of all moral burdens.

Manja is abruptly shown the door when a group of small children gushes in from outside. They are Meneer Wasserfall's grandchildren.

"I told them I would take them out," says Meneer Wasserfall.

As Manja turns to thank him, he says, "My mother-in-law they used to stay there. There were houses in the reserve. If you can speak to her, she shall maybe tell you something. Not her, no, I shall say she is already a bit off. But her sister, my aunt, my wife's aunt. She will know."

"Yes," replies Manja with a sinking heart. She is exhausted. Is she ready, now, for more of this? She cannot, in this context, escape a profound feeling of vagrancy and lostness. Out loud she says,

"That would be interesting. Where does she live?"

"On Red Hill. If you go up with the road you will see the little stone house. There."

Meneer Wasserfall seems to be referring to a house both very clear and very near. Manja cannot see it.

"Red Hill?" she says hesitantly, tasting the name for the first time.

"Red Hill Road!" says Meneer Wasserfall. Clearly he is impatient with her slowness, her failure to understand anything. She should have better informed herself, after all. One must get information! How rude of her to barge in on this man's life without knowing the next thing about his circumstances, his everyday surroundings, his 'ground'.

'Yet,' (she can't help thinking), 'this is why I am here.' Just like at the university, where she refused as much as it was possible to read secondary literature - which so often seemed fake, dead, parasitic - in favour of wrestling with the original texts, here, too, she wants no less than the real thing. It puts her sorely at a disadvantage. Opens her up to making grave mistakes. Is she flaunting her ignorance?

"You do not know the area no?" says Meneer Wasserfall.

Behind him the children are jumping from the stairs.

"Not very well," confesses Manja, cringing.

He is irritated; the children are becoming progressively unruly. He explains the directions to her stoically and energetically; in the way that one might coax a stray herd animal back into the fold. He almost shouts at her,

"You will see it!"

She does not believe him. Her eyes are not open like his. She does not know the countryside. Everything is noisy and blurred here. She is not used to driving, things rushing past her before she has had time to see them. All she wants is to go back home, to hide under the covers on Eric's bed, to forget this vicious little man who overwhelms her so with his craggy speech, torn from his strangely overgrown and pungent gums. She longs for the whispering forest behind the high fence, for Maxwell tipping his cap and the clicking of his pruning shears.

As she gets into her car, Gabriel Wasserfall's three grandchildren whirl around him and she just has time to notice the change in his bearing as he takes the two youngest by the hands and ushers the biggest before him, down the path towards the rickety little gate. A twinkling water restored to calm, lapping at his loves.

Chapter 22 The Sisters of Red Hill

Following Gabriel Wasserfall's directions, Manja passes the surfers for the second time. Nothing seems to have changed. They float upon the water's surface beside some dozing gulls. Further on a sign reads 'Misty Cliffs' and to the left of the road some houses perch precariously high above. Falling off to the right are rocky banks and bits of beach and a few houses here, too. Who lives here? By the thunder of this water and salt brimming in the air? It can only be the wealthy. Wealthy, healthy (many of the houses are accessible only by the ascent of seemingly endless steps) - and wild. What place, if any, might such people be called upon to occupy now, in the new dispensation?

For the open ocean is wild here and even on a warm day such as today, rows upon rows of breakers strive headfirst to pass on beyond themselves. The sight of the turquoise rush takes Manja's breath away. Here it is, running itself out over her throat, between her shoulder blades. It seeps through her as into sand, this feeling of the water's cold, green friendship.

The car takes her past the sight, the feeling, too quickly. Before she can act, or think, it is gone, behind her, and she is in a village with sandy roads leading both ways from the tar. Curving left, away from the coast she finds Red Hill Road easily, after all, climbing up its curls, going down into second gear to get round them. How easy it is to drive. Passing by without touching, without smelling or hearing anything. Men and women emerge out of bushes or disappear into them. Where do they come from and where do they go? Are they at one with this bush, like snakes, creeping beetles, birds? Do they metamorphose on entering the thickets? And again the question: whose ground? Of earth, of sky, of clay or heavenly debris such as human bodies are made - might the most political act not be to garden, or to tend seaweed in the cradles of new ocean beds?

Finally, Manja is on level ground. She buzzes past a gate. Her foot slides off the accelerator and the car slows down abruptly. She turns around and enters the gate, nearing a tiny, whitewashed structure with the car hobbling over roots.

She parks. There is no sign of human life. She is an invader. She is intruding upon people's privacy. In the name of what is she doing this? Her book? Herself? Herself.

'I am new in the neighbourhood,' she ought to say, 'trying to discover where I find myself. Whom have I landed among? Where am I?' This would be the truth.

She gets out of the car. It feels wrong, distrustful to lock it, so she doesn't. Bright red gladioli bloom in the wilderness to the left of the house as she approaches. Beyond it, scorched trees in naked sand. Toward the right, round the back, is a rain tank and what must be an outside toilet. A pit toilet.

The sight of it fills Manja with calm. There is a feeling of an old orderliness here that reminds her of her father's stories of his childhood, the primitive arrangements that still reigned, as they do here, in his grandmother's house where he grew up. 'People like me,' thinks Manja desperately, 'live here.' Timidly she follows the track which leads left to a front door: a stable door. The top hatch is open. Manja's eye falls on two portraits directly opposite: a beautiful young mulatto woman beside the popular maidenly version of Christ. Though she has always found the picture thoroughly nauseating, here it fills her with relief of a kind. Her own grandmother, after all, had a crucifix over her bed, which Manja found no less alienating.

Manja knocks on the open hatch and to her surprise a tiny, wrinkled woman materialises on the other side of the door.

Manja introduces herself. She does not tell the truth. The truth is too ridiculous. She needs authority on her side. Her work. Data-capture. "I am writing a book for children," she says assertively, "for Hardy and Strutt. They publish books."

Does the word 'publish' mean anything to this woman? Has she ever heard of Hardy and Strutt? Certainly the mention of the name has not impressed her. She is squinting at Manja as if she were trying to decipher very small script.

"I would like," says Manja, trying to sound cheerful, "to know about people like yourself. For my book. About where you lived and how, because it was not cities for you, like now."

Can she not make herself clearer?

The use of the formal 'u' seems to flatter the woman; there is a stirring within her. Manja continues, "Your son-in-law, Gabriel Wasserfall, sent me here."

Sent by the sea. These are her only credentials.

The wizened woman gazes blankly at her. Manja feels that her words are being returned to her unopened, unheard, and unconsidered. Perhaps she deserves to be rejected. What is she doing here, after all?

Then the woman opens the bottom hatch. She steps out with the care of an elderly body. She closes the hatch. She puts an astonishingly hard, strong hand upon Manja's shoulder and leads her around the corner of the building. The hand re-assures Manja. Once again, more acutely even than before, she is reminded of the matriarchs in her father's family. Her own grandmother whose hands, like these, were big and heavy and whose touch, like this, was neither soft nor merciful.

On the side of the house is another stable door whose top hatch is open. The ancient mistress knocks briefly, very hard. A tall, yellow-brown woman in a man's pale shirt collar emerges and Manja feels herself being pushed forward. She re-explains her mission to the woman, who must be Meneer Wasserfall's aunt.

As she speaks, Manja notices that water is streaming relentlessly out of the aunt's eyes. It seems to be entirely free of salt. It cannot be that she is weeping, since she responds with extraordinary heartiness to Manja. She steps out of her little room, gesturing and speaking matter-of-factly and full of cheer, while her eyes pour forth their mysterious transparent liquid so freely that her cheeks glint in the late morning sun.

"My name is Wanda," she says, "but the people say but Irene, why I don't know. Wanda van Vuuren is my name. That," - waving towards the other woman who is standing clasping her huge hands to her heart, "is my sister, Lewanna. Minnaar is her name, her husband was a Minnaar. Come."

She strides off, taking Manja's hand, "Come. I shall tell you everything."

She sniffs. The sound echoes in the chambers of her skull.

Manja has not heard of people suffering from such an ailment, which this involuntary shedding of tears must surely be. Such an extreme runniness of the eyes would be exacerbated by cold and wind, both of

which are sharply present up here on this hilltop with its scarlet blooms.

Mrs van Vuuren leads Manja into her sister's room.

"We can sit here," she declares. She motions for Manja to seat herself on a couch beneath Christ and the mulatto. Before Manja stands an empty table. To her right a little way on is a lounge chair into which Mrs Minnaar sinks with an earnest, almost festive air. Mrs van Vuuren sits between her sister and Manja, on a kitchen chair. Between her and Manja, in the corner of the room, is a small side table, covered with a hand-crocheted doilie. Upon this rests a vase filled with a handful of luminous gladioli.

The wind cuts through the open hatch of the door into the clean, tidy space. There is no window. Manja wraps her jersey over her hands and knees. Mrs van Vuuren, she notices, wears a black school jersey over her shirt, one of the kind that Manja knows well provide no warmth. Still Mrs van Vuuren is weeping or, at any rate, welling copiously. Manja must ask a medical practitioner about such a phenomenon. She extracts her pen and notebook from her satchel.

"Everything," says Mrs van Vuuren, "everything I know I shall tell. So that you can write it down." She sniffs. "I am Wanda van Vuuren," she continues pedantically. "That is what people call me. Look, you can see it in my ID book."

She opens the booklet, which she has extracted from the front pocket of her unbecoming shirt. She pushes the book under Manja's nose. A young, handsome woman with a remarkably oval face looks directly at the camera. The picture confirms a no-nonsense air, a quality of freshness. "Here is my cross." The cross is large, carefully drawn. "I can naturally not read and write."

She wipes her sleeve across her nose. This is not a dry woman. Not like her sister. There is dripping coming from within. Her thick brown lips are completely wet.

"I was born in Baskloof. Down there. In the house next to Glenda, which burnt down."

"Glenda?" says Manja, "Baskloof? Ek is nie seker of ek die plek ken nie." I am not sure I know the place.

Mrs van Vuuren looks at her. She waves her hand.

"Daar onder," she replies. There it is. Can't you see?

Manja can see nothing. She sits forward on her seat, then leans back, abandoning herself to what seems to have become a permanent feeling of bewilderment. She is in the deep end and cannot swim. 'Let me go under,' she thinks, feeling faint from what she knows is hunger. "Go but on, please," she says, "I shall look for the place later. I shall surely find it."

"Yes," says Mrs van Vuuren. "Glenda lives there," she continues, "my daughter, the fourth one. It burnt down after a while, where we stayed. And then we moved to the ground at Kromrivier, I was already grown quite tall. Even then I always liked men's clothes, boys' clothes. See - a man's shirt. Men's pants. Irene van Vuuren has always dressed like this. And we were selling wood. My Ma and Pa came from the wood - from George. And after a while my Pa made a boat - his own boat. And my Ma sent me to fetch water - when I grew older after a time. I carried two tins of water with a stick. One tin in front, the other behind, with the brown water from the river, the Krom River which ran right into the sea at Die Mond. We scooped water and washed. Washing. Wash, wash and hang it up like this."

She is rubbing and wringing out the washing. She reaches out from her chair and hangs the clothes over a bush, dripping. Her arms, with the sleeves of her jersey pushed up towards the elbows, are brown as leather and as tough. They are extraordinarily long, rippling with narrow muscles and tendons.

"My Ma was strict," Mrs van Vuuren says. "You simply rinsed the washing, then she checked. Is it clean? No - if it was still dirty, then she simply slapped that wet washing about our ears. Left, right." Mrs van Vuuren slaps the washing.

"You have to wash everything spotlessly clean, you understand? Clean." Manja understands. Mrs Minnaar understands. They all understand. Skoon. Clear.

'Objective of the lesson: Clarity.

Method: Rubbing and rinsing.

Control of error: Slapping.'

Why is it not given to Manja to perform her work to the requirements? The problem, no doubt, is herself. The other writers have gathered their facts, among which are personal experiences voiced by their

'informants'. Now they are selecting, cutting and shifting their 'raw material' according to the educative themes: Forced Removals; Memory; Natural Disasters; and so forth. As for Manja, she does not seem able to move beyond the state of rawness. Indeed she does not see the purpose of doing so. Why must she edit out Mr Wasserfall's frothy saliva in the sun, the bony bodies of the sisters before her, the burning tongues of the flowers beside her arm, the teeth of the wind right here, now? Why are these things less important than 'Lesson Objective - Summarising - Step One, Step Two, Step Three'? No, Manja is surely lacking, mentally deformed in some way, skewed from what to everybody else is obvious. She is not in command. She lets these meek strangers take her for a ride!

"Our mother," says Mrs van Vuuren, "my late mother sent me to the bay, a sugar bag rolled up under my arm. Says she, 'I think you're going to the bay - here: coffee, flour, sugar'. All that she needs she writes down. And so I ran. I'd make it in three hours that way.

"With my Ma you couldn't now say, it's heavy. You just had to take. That's why my back is now bent, you see, because it's tough from when you're young."

To whom is Manja's loyalty? Powerful Hardy and Strutt? Or to this poor rich woman? For, the two - the publisher's and the person's - do not appear to be compatible. The former wants to inflate, ever to increase itself so as never to be blown away ('Objective, Method, Control of Error'). The latter only wishes to fly, to become smaller and smaller on the horizon, where usually only air and music go.

'Lies,' thinks Manja, 'I do want lies. I want this woman's fire. I am too weak to do anything but submit to her.'

And - they all know it - it is the first and last time that Mrs van Vuuren shall speak herself to somebody in Manja's position.

"You know," continues Mrs van Vuuren, "the rowing - we didn't have engines like they have them now in the boats. We had rowing teams. That boat lay in the water the whole day, Nooi, on the sea, and then they come ashore before sunset. The boat is heavy then, you know, and I had to carry it. From the water right over the beach to the top where the dry sand is. Because look, if it rains heavily tonight and the water

comes gushing down the shore, it will take the boat with it now, won't it? You understand, don't you?"

Manja nods obediently. Greedily, the woman watches Manja's pen and nods herself.

"Ja," she says, "it was heavy for my Ma, you see. My Pa drowned in the sea, in his own boat. It was three of them, all three drowned in the seaweed."

Mrs Minnaar's head inclines compassionately and briefly it seems to Manja that there is a surge of - surely it is tears? - in Mrs van Vuuren's eyes.

"I can remember it," she says, "I was maybe eight."

She wipes the wetness from her face with a flat hand as Manja marvels and puzzles, telling herself over and over that this woman cannot possibly be crying - nothing else points towards such a conclusion. There has been not a single sigh, nor sob, nor even the faintest grimace to suggest grief. On the contrary, her eyes are black and shiny, filled only with humour and movement. Her wiping hand is but the swipe of a wing through the air as the body gains in height and speed. "They caught crayfish in nets," says Mrs van Vuuren, "to put into the boat, you see, when suddenly there came a wave - surely - which broke the boat. And so it was heavy for my Ma and I had but to go. Ma hired me out. I had to go and work. I got but twelve shillings and sixpence a month."

Suddenly she is shouting vehemently. "Twelve shilling and sixpence. Per month. Per month! I cleaned the house. I was so young, you see. I must wash, I must iron and I'm sleeping under the table on a mattress, in the kitchen."

Now she sees that the waters welling in the woman's eyes are - yes, they are tears which have been streaming freely throughout. Finally, her face and body play their part.

"Ja," she continues, sniffing, "write it up. There was another one, he came also and made these pictures. He came twice, and then we didn't see him again. He was a white man," she goes on, "where he came from I don't know. With a book and pencil and stuff. I don't believe he had a car. He must have walked, coming on that road from Klawer, but a Navy man he wasn't. He had these blueblue eyes and asked for water, didn't he, Sussie?"

"Ja," sings Mrs Minnaar, her eyes half-closed on a gently swaying neck.

"He sat there, here where Nooi sits now, and made such sketches. He gave me some. I shall show you. He asked after the plants. He came with me into the veld, because of my knee, Nooi knows, to fetch herbs. Then he sat there and wrote down what it was good for. Surely a doctor was he."

Manja is trembling. She needs to eat something. Don't these women ever make tea or coffee? She sits forward. It is difficult for her to speak, let alone smile, when lunchtime arrives without lunch.

"I must go," she says, "I shall come again."

Mrs van Vuuren exits with her and persuades Manja, who is too weak to protest, to look into her room around the corner. There is space only for the bed. Beside the head is a tiny table with a gas cooker on it. Mrs van Vuuren mutters and bends for something under her bed. It is a fairly large suitcase which she heaves onto the bed with difficulty, because of the limited space. She opens it and proudly shows Manja her range of men's wear. She feels under the clothes and extracts a large, yellow envelope. She peers inside and pulls out a few sheets of brownish paper. She holds them out to Manja, but Manja is too slow, so she lays them on the bed. Manja's stomach growls and Mrs van Vuuren giggles.

"Look how he drew me," she says as her cheeks glisten once more, "he was now a bit different. I had to show him where to go in the veld." The sheets of paper are tatty, marked with fingerprints. The sketches are in charcoal. Two of them show Mrs van Vuuren's face. The third is of her hands. Her fingers flash across the page in thin, quick lines. They are good drawings. Manja returns the sheets to Mrs van Vuuren. She needs solitude now. She returns to her car. Having stood in the shade of the stone pines, it provides no warmth. For as long as Manja can see her, Mrs van Vuuren stands on the track between the gladioli and the small, white house, exuberantly waving her long, brown arm.

Manja's new living quarters in Rocklands Road are luxurious. There is a feeling of expansiveness due to the overwhelming amount of light that enters the seaward rooms. 'Prime view' is the term used for such a situation. Yet Manja is half-ashamed to admit that she conjures up a hedge to enclose and protect her from a full view of the vast, flat water before the windowpanes. She sleeps in the guest bedroom below, whose sliding door opens onto a garden filled with indigenous bushes and blooms. The empty surface of the sea only just peeps up over these from this hideout.

There is great satisfaction to be had, however, from the ability to step out of the property and to feel, at last, unencumbered by vertical growth and construction. To take Ruby, the setter, and hasten with her up the slopes of Swartkop - the bleak mountain in whose pouch the suburb nestles - and run down again beaten by wind or, sometimes, rain. To stride down to the main road takes less than five minutes, then she lets Ruby run free, herself to mosey self-forgetfully among the rubble of the rocks along the shore, poking her finger gently into anemones at low tide to feel their suck. She feeds them periwinkles and never tires of watching their yellow or red fronds contract muscularly in order to absorb the meal. Thank heaven for this wordless openness, the dumbness of these rocks.

On a venture into town she discovers a path leading into a kloof, from whose mottled, rocky bosom she finds a thick aorta of water pushing itself down the cliffs into the valley.

Manja knows that she is relying upon communion with this world to save her. For more than even in the forest, a fear of other people, illogically coupled with a bitter loneliness, has her in its grip. Despite this, she somehow manages to obey the given theme of 'Common Ground' and to produce lessons based on her readings, though not, alas, upon the interviews - these are too grand, or perhaps simply too chaotic for her to be able to adapt them in good faith.

For whom, though, is she writing? She searches in her imagination for likely readership of this new and - she cringes - capitalist book. She has not forgotten her one-time students. But can she rely upon her memories of them to provide her with a sense of who the new readers will be? Moreover, as Eric himself said only recently, surprising her

with a rather acid tone: the desire for profit is at odds with the desire to produce truly valuable teaching materials. Did he really mean that? If he is correct, then what is this game? Are they charlatans? What are their options? Neither Eric nor Manja have the ability to perceive, or indeed to create, alternatives in the new South Africa which, as it appears, is now a mere cell in the corporation of the globe.

The predominantly elderly people in the neighbourhood are both friendly and helpful, which provides her with a fragile feeling of security. Some share themselves with surprising openness and invite her repeatedly for cups of tea. Almost without exception, she declines. Those whom she does visit she notices feel passionately about the vegetation that is natural here (now, in spring, it is at its lushest); many have an admirable knowledge of the birdlife and are baffled by her ignorance in this respect. She quickly learns, too, however, that these deep feelings of interest in the heart stop short at the employees that potter more or less languidly about the houses and gardens. She responds with feelings of sadness, however, rather than anger now to the fact that a régime still rules here that can, at best, be called patronising.

Manja herself is subjected on a weekly basis to the sorely detached demeanours of Nursie and William, the Griffin's domestic worker and gardener. Every Tuesday at eight in the morning, she must let Nursie and William into the house, which is instantaneously filled with doleful grimness as the char clanks the few dishes that Manja might have left in the sink.

Manja conceals herself from Nursie's invasive and resentful presence for as long as she is able. Idly poking through the cupboard, deciding which set of beads to wear today, she finds an abandoned black woollen cap. It has a skull and crossbones design on it, beneath which is embroidered the name of one of the country's top soccer teams - 'Orlando Pirates'. Whose is it? She has never seen Eric wearing such a cap. She pulls it over her head. It makes her feel boyishly free and equally safe as a child.

Hunger drives her up the stairs into the kitchen. She passes through the spruce lounge, past the amateurish pastel drawings of Eric and his brother, into the darkness of the corridor. Nursie's rotund form in its

baby-pink apron is kneeling on the floor at the bottom end of the passage. She sighs as she bends over, groans as she pushes herself up again and lays a heap of books and papers to one side.

"Good morning," says Manja.

Nursie does not hear her.

"Morning!" shouts Manja. "Would you like some coffee!"

Nursie turns her head. She starts when she sees Manja and stares rudely at the cap.

"I would like some rooibos tea, please," she replies after a pause, in careful, correct English through pursed lips. She does not like Manja. She obviously feels that Manja has no right to be here.

In the kitchen above a small table hangs an enlarged photograph of Eric's brother, Theo. He is not looking at the camera, but, frowning slightly, he focuses on a distant spot to the side below. His penetrating eyes are thus hardly visible. He looks clean - cleaner than she ever saw him. She is not sure that the respectable image improves him. It makes him look rather ordinary, after all. The picture must have been taken here, in the wind: his straight brown hair streaks his forehead, throat and shoulders in fine wisps and there is a blur of greenery behind him, which could be that of the bush in the garden below. Did he ever stay here? Did he maybe sleep in the very bed in which Manja lies each night now? Is the cap on her head perhaps his? Suddenly uncomfortable, Manja pulls it off. There is something eerie in photographs of dead people. Here he is, this man whom she once mistook for a tramp, the artist behind the sublime mielie. Handless now, headless, capless, his dirty feet forever gone, his odour completely forgotten. A ghost, pure spirit - floating where? As Manja stares at it, the framed form with its searching aspect looms ever larger, ever more exclusively, till at length it seems almost to quiver with a peculiar liveliness. And the hidden gaze - oh, it is looking at her, for her! Manja stares back, burning with curiosity. The kettle has switched itself off and the agitation in the water subsides. For sure there is breath in the portrait. Something is happening between her and this clean-cut delinquent who is as dead or alive as she. Shyly, she re-covers her head with the pirates'-seal cap, looking at Theo as if into a mirror. A breath that is not just her own, but she is certain is shared, sweeps her out of her seat as she turns her back to the

picture, convinced by a tender feeling of joy and peace in her gut that she is not alone.

She brings Nursie her cup of tea. As she places the cup onto the windowsill, she catches a glimpse of the papers that Nursie is tucking back into the wooden chest between balls of naphthalene. Manja stares. Her indiscreet silence alerts Nursie who levers herself up with much wheezing. She fruffs up her apron and pats her bosom.

"You know Theo?" she says to Manja.

"Yes," says Manja, trembling at the core. She sinks onto her haunches and gazes at the picture on top of the pile. It is a labyrinth of scribbles within whose mesh a form of some sort is concealed. She removes the page, unable to control the terrible quivering that conducts itself through her hand. The next has words beside rough, scratched tiny portraits, likewise sculpted out of pencil-lines. She looks at Nursie, who is peering over her shoulder with equal interest, as it seems.

"I wonder," says Manja, "if I could have a look at these. Theo once illustrated one of my articles. Maybe," she lies, "I could use some of these drawings for my book."

There is a pause.

"Ja," says Nursie then, "take them. Then you must bring them back." She shrugs her shoulders and clears her throat grumpily.

Another pause.

"Where do you think the living go," asks Manja, "when they die?"

Nursie stares at her. "It is with us," she says emphatically, "that we do not forget those who do die. One must not."

Manja has no peace with Nursie energetically wielding the duster, and the vacuum cleaner's yowl, so she packs Theo's papers into her satchel along with her 'official' work and drives to the public library in Fish Hoek. It is a windy, cloudy day, the sea is murky, and the beaches are heaped with kelp.

She settles herself at a table that is empty except for a pensioner who is gravely perusing the paper. He snuffles noisily as he is doing so, but his unkempt, yellowish whiskers attract Manja. With his white hedgerows of hair on either side of his peaked blue cap he looks to her like an ancient sea captain. His skin is so mottled and coarse as to look pained.

sitting opposite this old animal, she empties her bag. She touches the papers gingerly. Should she tell Eric? Ask his permission? Surely, yes. And yet - why should she? She loved with all her heart the one illustration of Theo's she saw. If nothing else gives her licence to do as she is doing now, that must. Eric has a chip on his shoulder with regard to his brother; he had it before his death and has not attended to it since. Best to leave him out of this. He is too busy anyway, to worry about things that have no immediate justification. To him, what Manja is doing now would be without purpose, idle. 'Like my interviews,' she thinks with a pang. Yet - how can she explain it? This morning's encounter with Theo; her conversation with Gabriel Wasserfall and Wanda van Vuuren - all of these have strangely combined to form an inescapable sense of a task that lies ahead of her, as if she owed these people something, a debt that cannot be nullified except by payment in kind.

The light brightens in the library as the sun rises higher in the sky outside. The old man's prickly whiskers gleam briefly as he huffs, drools and puffs, and clumsily turns the page of the Cape Times. He leans back and extracts an unironed handkerchief from his pocket, wipes his mouth, then his glasses, then continues reading with a relieved groan.

The top sheet before Manja bears a sketch of a boat. The hull is half-hearted, but the rigging is composed - carefully striking string after string the pencil has built a delicate warp. There are more in this vein, lineated things for which, Manja realises as she moves from one to the next, the object that is represented is far less the issue than are the pencil's marks. Like fine, grey snow the lead has settled on the brownish sheets. It seems that Theo hardly ever used tough, white paper.

Suddenly the colour in the library disappears. Clouds are being blown across the sun. No, this is idle, after all. She must put the stuff away. The deadline for the first draft of her lessons is only ten days away. If only she knew what was the matter with her. She has lost all impetus, is aware of a resentment that blooms cancerously against the demands placed upon her by her work.

"You look like you could do with a cup of tea," says the pensioner, who has closed his newspaper, removed his spectacles and is creakingly getting up from his chair.

"There is a place around the corner - " he gestures vaguely, "would you care for some?"

"I'm not thirsty," says Manja, startled.

"Too bad," replies the sea captain, "I would have liked the company." He limps slowly off.

How stupid she is. Could this being do her any harm? Why does she close herself so to the world? Manja rapidly stashes her things and hurries after the man.

"I will," she says cheerily, "I'll join you, after all."

Outside, the man lights a cigarette with difficulty in the wind.

"One of the few enjoyments I have in my life," he says, adding, "by the way, I am Giles Moore."

He holds out his hand which, when Manja takes it, has a slippery, oily feel to it. A thing, rather than a hand - ruddy, stubbled, flecked and hardly mobile.

It takes forever to get to the coffee shop and Manja struggles not to outpace Giles Moore's slow shuffles. She finds his decayed body odour revolting and as they walk, a sense of shock embeds itself inside her. It deepens with each step: they are a pathetic sight; this straggling man and she, accompanying him meekly like a self-denying do-gooder. With a sinking heart she realises that people around no doubt see a daughter dutifully ushering her ailing father to his treat: morning tea with her, with youth. How can she disentangle herself? It does not help that, on some level, they are a more likely pair than she and Oliver will ever be. Idle, delinquent, wasted, worn - are these, then, the qualities of her 'real' family? Drowned spirits all - quenched, forlorn?

Eventually they sit down, that is to say, she sits. Giles falls into a chair, exhaling loudly, which elicits disapproving stares. He asks her what she wants, then orders imperially, as if she were in his charge.

"Do you not work?" Giles Moore interrupts her thoughts.

"I am a freelance writer," replies Manja emphatically, bouncing the teabag with her spoon in the pot of hot water which was brought almost immediately. "I am master of my own time. It is a law I have always lived by. I do not need to be told when to do what. I can make my own decisions in that regard."

Her own forthrightness surprises her. It must be the man's sloppy dress (he wears an unironed, shabby shirt, stained trousers and slippers) that is causing her to feel quite unrestrained.

"You must be very disciplined," replies Giles Moore.

"I don't think I am," says Manja. She pours the red tea out of the stainless steel pot. She makes a mess due to the pot's typically poor design. "I get very sidetracked. Even this morning I did. In fact, I shouldn't even be here. I should be working."

He chooses not to interpret her statement as an insult to himself.

"You are fortunate," he retorts, "to be so free."

"Yes," admits Manja. She blows on the tea, which is scalding. "I don't think there is any other way to live. To live any other way is to be dead."

She looks at him, dazed by her own words. She has had these thoughts before, but she does not remember ever having voiced them. This man's presence seems to be robbing her of all her manners.

He makes a show now, though, of being offended.

"You are saying that most of humanity are dead. You are sitting on a very high horse."

He is spitting, his false teeth are clacking. He pushes them around his mouth with his tongue. He is deliberately being offensive himself.

Manja makes a conscious effort to look into Giles Moore's eyes. There is no doubt he pricks her interest. Past the spittle, the dirty beard, the spiky bristles on the tip of his nose and the unhealthy-looking mincemeat of his skin. She stares at two soft, liquid-brown pools behind a strange, whitish veil on the outer lens. As he speaks, the veil retreats, his eyes darken. The darkness excites her; she senses that it has not had many witnesses. It is as if she had succeeded at something unexpected, something pure and unrewarding. Giles Moore stops, becomes aware of something (what?). Then he looks down and removes another cigarette from his pack.

"Would you like to see my flat?" he says, "I'd like to show you something. I live just around the corner."

Manja's curiosity gets the better of her. How silly it would be to fear those sad, brown eyes. This is not a stranger. This is Giles Moore, the old sea captain. The designation awakens an irresistible, perhaps dangerous feeling of trust in her and she wonders what her father, what

Eric would say as they leave the restaurant where they have each paid their share.

"There is nothing to be afraid of," says Giles, "it is just some things which I make to pass the time."

She feels ashamed that he is aware of what must after all be reticence. What is it that he means? Passing time. Did Theo's drawings pass his time? What does it mean 'to pass time'? Does a stone pass time? Is she passing time by accompanying this - stranger? Has she no life of her own to go to? If the truth be told, she has no feeling for the passage of time. She has always walked with Giles and will continue to do so forever. The only problem, it seems, is the hard matter of the world - this space, this very moment, in which she has to stop herself from taking Giles' arm. His smell is terrible, but she finds his shuffling even more agonising. To boot it all, he wants to know where she lives. How true it would be to combust right now and be scattered into the universe by way of a reply to this horrible question. Reluctantly, she tells him, trying to be as vague as possible. In vain, for he probes till he is satisfied. His body may be worn, but his wit is not blunted by age. And again, Manja senses the presence of the sea, of timeless swells in tune with secret respiratory cells deep inside her consciousness. Can they really be completely irrelevant to the here and now?

Giles' bachelor flat is on the first floor of a little block of six apartments. The orange curtains are drawn. A radio stands on a low metal table beside an unmade bed. Cigarette boxes, ashtrays, pills and a lighter or two lie on the floor nearby. Otherwise, the space is filled with heaps of newspapers. There is an armchair, holding a tower of them. Giles shows Manja around the kitchen nook, which is cluttered with strange objects. There, upon a camping table, stands an enormous, tiered structure.

It is like a wedding cake, except that it is not white, but bright green and red. All around the base are lobsters modelled in papier-mâché relief, painted alternately red and green. On the next level are large, simple floral, or perhaps shell shapes. Upon that are what might pass as fronds of seaweed, alternating with starfish suffocated by paint. On the top level is a seal that, alone upon this monument, is black.

The bathroom that leads off from this space reveals a bath filled with buckets of paint, wooden sticks and spoons lying about, and a boggy smell of wet paper and wallpaper glue reaches Manja's nostrils. She looks around at Giles who has seated himself on his bed, switched on the radio and lit a cigarette.

"So there you are," he wheezes.

On the shelf on the other side of the bed stands a range of smaller 'models', if that is the word for the objects. The kitchen surfaces are entirely occupied by papier-mâché cubes, thick discs and cylinders all crawling with red and green crayfish, slugs and crabs.

"Everybody brings me their old newspapers," continues Giles, "I always need more. But you see," he waves his hand and a twig of ash falls and disintegrates on the orange-brown carpet, "there is so little space." He turns up the volume of the radio. "I'm afraid I can't offer you a cup of tea," he says.

"I'm all right," says Manja.

"There's whiskey," says Giles, "I won't offer you any. I don't want to corrupt you. I hope you don't mind my having a tot. You're welcome to have some, of course," he adds, seemingly having changed his mind.

Manja shakes her head. The gloomy room offers no vision of an outside world. Giles bends down with a central creak. From beneath the disheveled bed sheets hanging to the ground he extracts a bottle. Manja steps to the curtain and peeps out. The view is onto a set of curtain-covered windows in the opposite block. A few pigeons are resting on the red-tiled roof, puffed up against the wind. A long weed flaps to and fro in the gutter.

She notices an old wedding photograph leaned against the window, in a glassless frame. By the eyes alone, she recognises Giles in the groom. He is dashing, terribly handsome, but his expression is shy. His small, serious smile seems both suspicious and suspect. The bride is a picture of perfection in her lace gown and headdress with drop-shaped beads upon her forehead. She is very dark with pronounced eyebrows and a beauty that Manja finds breathtakingly fierce.

She lets the sticky, smelly curtain drop and turns to face Giles in the racket of the radio. "Sorry," he says, noticing her irresoluteness. He turns the radio off. "It's a habit," he explains, "there's nothing much for me to do."

"What do you do with these?" asks Manja, indicating the indigestible sea-salads.

"Nothing," says Giles, "when people want them, I give them. There is too little space here. You want one?"

"No, thank you," Manja is forced to say. "The seal is quite nice, though," she adds in a moment of weakness.

Before she can stop him, Giles is at the sculpture with a serrated knife. He saws off the seal and hands it to Manja, flipperless and with a sorely wounded underbelly.

"Here."

"No!"

He forces it into Manja's hands. It has no weight to speak of, but is sharp to the touch, as if armoured. Giles turns away.

"Is that you?" says Manja inquisitively, lifting the old curtain again to reveal the old print.

"That's my wife," nods Giles, re-seating himself, "me and my wife. She left me. I should say I let her go. I did not treat her well. That's the one big mistake I made in my life."

He lights another cigarette. He smokes it while drinking. Burning wet, burning dry. His eyes are strangely glazed.

"What did you do to her?" says Manja with a tight throat.

Giles suddenly looks galled. "I don't want to talk about it," he says peevishly. "If you don't mind, I would prefer to be alone now."

Chapter 24 Theo and Eric

With the seal in one hand and keeping her satchel from bumping her leg with the other, Manja hurries to the library car park and speeds back to Rocklands Road. Eric's mother's burgundy golf is parked on the side of the road, a sign that Eric is here. Manja has no home of her own. She is a person adrift, fundamentally without means. There is nowhere for her to seek solace, solitude. She locks the door of Eric's car (a tricky operation, since the lock was picked some time ago) and enters the house dumbly. She walks into the smell of brasso or silvo or whatever is being poured and rubbed into dumb, matt, heavy objects forever destined to lose their shine. She mumbles a greeting to Eric and Nursie, both of whom are in the kitchen, descends down the ladder into the hole in the lounge floor and sinks onto her bed with her satchel still slung around her shoulder, absent-mindedly turning in her hands the wretched paper seal.

She feels devastated. She has no way of placing this morning's encounter. She knows she ought to let it go: it was an arbitrary, meaningless event. But she is occupied by her memory of Giles Moore's beleaguered visage, his oily odour, his mucus-laden voice and rough cough. Not least of all, the dying fire in his eyes - which the plaintive expression of the amateurish animal-object brings poignantly close. She puts it down and pours the contents of her satchel onto the floor and kneels down before it, spreading the papers. She notices a page whose shadows thicken to pure blackness here, then loosen into lines, rounding, forming, straying upwards and feathering: an eyebrow over an eye. Without lifting from the paper the fine lead, by the faintest of caresses, strokes down again and in this gesture makes a cheek. Moves over, feels and thus creates a lip. No, not even: it is a knowledge of lip that is awakened by no more than a lilt in the shadow. Half a face.

The other half is covered by fingers: a wiping hand. The sketch is of Mrs van Vuuren. Manja stares. She laughs softly. The tramp-doctor, looking for herbs! She pages through the downy papers, setting aside those containing script for later.

There are several more versions of Mrs van Vuuren. The word 'water' is written numerously around one of the sketches in Theo's remarkably unattractive handwriting - the letters look like sticks, quickly pushed

together for the occasion. 'Water on the heart', reads Manja, struggling to decipher the jagged hand. On the back she notices more words: 'An injury to one is an injury to all. But a reward to one is not a reward to all -?' Acquainting herself with the recurring idiosyncrasies of the script, she makes out on yet another scrap: 'I'm burnt black, waiting for something to happen, engulfed by the presentness of the present'. And again, 'water on the heart', only this time is added, 'salt water'.

She hears steps overhead descending. She freezes and the steps cease. "Manja?"

It is Eric's voice. She completely forgot that he was here. She assembles herself and climbs up the rungs, forcing Eric to turn around and scramble out ahead of her. She does not want him to see her poring over his brother's - what are they? His brother's remains? Surely she is betraying Eric, has already betrayed him by her surreptitious act. "Manja," says Eric, once they are on even ground, "I'm not sure I know what is going on. Nursie told me that you took Theo's sketches and went off with them."

Of course, Nursie. What a busybody she is. Manja is flustered. Eric seems very angry with her. She has not seen him angry and she is aware, for the first time, of an excitement in herself towards him, mingled though it is with fear. She laughs despite herself.

"I didn't go off with them! I merely went to the library, so that Nursie could have the house to herself." She can feel Nursie listening triumphantly to the conversation. "Nursie said it was all right," she adds in a moment of sheer cowardice.

Eric is almost luminous with anger. To witness his efforts to control it doubles Manja's helpless giggles.

"I don't see what my brother's things have to do either with you or Nursie!" says Eric loudly. "How dare you? I can't believe it."

Manja stares guiltily at the large pastel renditions of Theo and Eric to her left. Blankly, they stare out, not at her, but at an indeterminate point in the distance. What lifeless drawings they are.

"I would like to know," continues Eric and to Manja's horror he takes her arm none too softly. Violently, she shakes him off as he continues, "to know what motivated you to steal my brother's things. Because that is effectively what you have done. Where are they? I want them back." He pushes himself past Manja and thumps down into her room.

"No!" cries Manja, hastening after, "I'm sorry, sorry." She takes Eric's hand which he pulls away. "Please let me explain. I meant no harm. I - I don't know. Your brother - look!"

She extracts the sketches of Mrs van Vuuren and gives them to Eric, smiling.

"This is the same woman I've been interviewing for 'Common Ground'. Theo knew her. She showed me sketches of his which he gave her. She thinks he was a doctor!"

All the luminosity has gone out of her old teammate. Looking quite ashen, he sits down.

"I thought you weren't using your interviews," he says. "What is this all about? I don't understand."

Manja notices with alarm that there are tears in Eric's amber eyes. She looks away. She would hate to embarrass him. It is as if Eric wants to cry, but cannot. It is strange even to see him sniff.

"You don't know," he says, "you are an only child. It is a lie to say I ever had a brother."

Lie? Manja's ears prick up.

"Two boys who god knows how came from the same parents. Look at this." He holds up the palm of his hand. Between the thumb and forefinger is a fairly thick, white scar. 'Well-healed,' Manja thinks spontaneously.

"We were - I don't know. Eight. Ten. I was cutting bread. He ripped the knife out of my hand. Six stitches here. He was a maniac, Manja. Did you know he was expelled from school?"

Manja shakes her head. When Eric gets onto the topic of his brother, he loses his imagination. He becomes a scapegoating mob.

"Maybe these drawings are good," continues Eric, "but he was a nasty piece of work. He gave nobody peace!"

"What a pity," replies Manja, "that your brother's talent - "

"Don't you now blame me for Theo's uselessness!" interrupts Eric, becoming angry again. "He chose to walk the streets in rags. That's what he wanted. My parents would have enrolled him for a Fine Arts degree any day. He lasted four months at the technikon. And you," continues Eric, "I wonder about your sympathy for these scruffy bits. You have all the choice in the world. You could have been in a position above me by now, if you really wanted. But you have always been careful to avoid me. Ever ready to retreat as soon as there is a hint of extra responsibility."

Manja is shocked. What he is saying is not untrue. Why, she lost faith in her teaching just as she has been losing faith in her educational writing. Yet there is a flaw in Eric's judgment.

"I do not," she hisses softly, "I do not have all the choice. Let me tell you," she says, "I would rather be swallowed by the sea now than nibble like a mouse at my pension when my hair is white."

He snorts mockingly. "Swallowed by the sea. I'd like to see that. Why don't you go right away? Go!" He waves his arm at her.

Manja scrambles to her feet.

"Yes," she says, "it would be easier. I am far less afraid of physical death than I am of -." She falters. What is it that she fears? She looks at Eric. "Your brother," she says, "had vision. That's what matters to me. I don't care about - about something solid out there to hold on to, that I must do so that - I can fit in! So that people like my father and you, Eric, I'm sorry to say, can nod approval. I care about -." She is thoughtful. "Something inside," she says. "There is something inside me, Eric. It is waiting. I can't explain it."

Eric has lost interest. He is toying with the seal. Manja takes it out of his hands and throws it into the waste paper basket.

"What's that thing?" says Eric.

"Why did you come here today?" she answers.

Eric gets up. "To see you," he replies. He steps over the littered carpet and goes towards the huge glass door. He looks out into the garden.

Manja advances from the nook at the bottom of the stairway. She kneels down on Theo's papers. She swivels her waist, her arms and hands gently brush up the sketches as she swings from right to left. Eric looks at her over his shoulder.

"Here I am," she says, "this is my lily pond."

He is handsome. Nothing like her dream man, who is probably not handsome at all, certainly not as proper. She is wrong for him. The moment he takes her face into his hands and kisses her, she knows it. She pushes him away, but it is too late, the gesture only provokes him and he holds onto her hard with his thin, coppery hands.

'I am being swallowed not by the sea, but by Eric,' she thinks and resigns herself. He kisses her all over, tasting her like a

connoisseur. It is strange to her, and she is conscious of feeling cold. At one point, she gives voice to her embarrassment.

"The pictures," she says, "we are all over them."

They move to the bed and awkwardly finish the business. He seems happy, which consoles her. When he lights up a cigarette and goes into the garden without covering himself, she studies him at her leisure. He smiles at her confidently from between the wild hyacinths and yellow river resin bushes. He is much too solid for her in every sense, ideal for a woman who values a reliable man. What has happened is a sign: she must disentangle herself from Eric. They do not tread the same path. Manja dresses and sets about smoothing and re-ordering the crinkled sheets of paper on the floor. Eric comes inside. He is covered in goose pimples. As he fastens his fancy Trevira pants (she has peeped at the label), he says,

"Look. Keep those if they are so important to you. I'm fine about it now. Just don't lose them. The truth is, it's my mother who is attached to them, not me."

He tucks in his flannel shirt which is covered with small apricot-coloured triangles.

"You helped me, Manja," he says, "as you always do. Maybe you don't know it. Life goes on."

Manja looks at him uncomprehendingly.

"Never mind," smiles Eric, kissing her possessively, "let's just forget the whole thing. I must go now, I'll come by tonight."

"What about little Mau?" replies Manja anxiously. When has she ever given a thought to Eric's cat?

Eric chuckles. "That is not your worry," he says imperially, adding, "I'll leave food for her. Sweetie."

His sudden familiarity bewilders Manja. She cannot remember anybody ever having used endearments with her. But Eric is impervious. He ruffles her hair.

"Try to get some work done, Writer," he says and leaps up the stairs two at a time.

Chapter 25 Manja's Decision

The deadline for Manja's work is upon her. She is seized with panic, as she is nowhere near ready. She spends up to sixteen hours a day before Eric's father's computer, in a little study that adjoins the main bedroom. She writes, re-drafts and re-orders page upon page of her manuscript. She tries her best to squeeze in Gabriel Wasserfall and Irene van Vuuren - but they are far too large, too liquid. She prints out the overflowings, becoming increasingly desperate as the hours and days go by. What is the problem? Is there no place in a book, upon the printed page, for a man who speaks like the sea? If only she could present the learners with a bottle of sea water each. Ah, yes, that would be good, it would be festive and true: she can see the bottles, gleaming opaque and green, labelled 'Common Ground', on desks in classrooms all over the country.

Darkness falls. These are all idle, self-defeating notions; she must rein herself in and be sensible.

What are the objectives of the lessons? The skills to be acquired? By what standards may learners evaluate their achievements at the end of the lesson? There are correct words (Manja has been presented with a list of them) which writers are obliged to use and which it is for the layout designer finally to place beside bullets. To make quite sure that they are dead, no doubt. Define, compare, recognise, identify. All very useful, forward-looking terminology to encourage positive action, no doubt. There is a place for it in the world, that is certain. An artist too, after all, must dissect corpses in order to re-create bodily form in different media. Death serving life.

Is there a space, however, in the new South Africa for living bodies of text? Manja is not sure. These seem to be considered to require too great a struggle in the heart and mind of the reader. A moving water of words may drown him.

In what may stem from a weird urge to force the signs of the alphabet into pictorial form, the new books upon which Eric and Manja are working already present page upon page of complex hieroglyphs: fragments of text entombed in flashes and splashes of ink, with icons pointing and winking one hither and thither through the cemetery. To promote attention, an eye stares out from the page. To indicate the doing of a task, a finger points the reader in the right direction.

Passages for reading are for some reason enclosed in shaded boxes; answers to exercises lie in open coffins.

As Manja does her best to conform to the editor's directions, the note of discord that has been with her throughout the year achieves orchestral proportions. She develops an abnormal degree of thirst, and pours litres of water daily down her throat before the incessantly humming, flickering machine. Whatever the advantages may be in this kind of writing, Manja must get out of it. She is keeping her body alive through the salary she receives, but her soul is dying, has already died. It is as if an eerily incandescent, dread disease were swirling in her marrow. Oh, she is a slave! She does not own her labour which she suffers to perform. She must be thankful for her pay in money - exactly what she needs for clothes, shelter and food, no more. But has she not, like any advanced creature, a sense of herself beyond mind and body and their needs? Where is the vision to imagine better times, to undo the dreary rhythms of this slog? What is this intangible war? She avoids Theo's papers. She has stashed them in the cupboard on the shelf between her underwear and jewellery. All that is delicate and precious. The papers belong there, no matter how smudged or how limited their range. His lines travel through her - arteries that bring fresh blood.

Yet in her state of torment, she grows to hate them, their freedom and very insignificance and she yields again to Eric's purposeful desire, clinging to him for her life as he gallops himself out upon her. He is her knight (never mind his armour is not shining), and it is her own faithlessness that makes her recalcitrant and burning dry. She must force herself, must break the evil demon that leaps about in her. For she has begun to fear that to cut off from Eric and his world will inevitably mean death, no less than exile from ordinary humanity - from safety and security. She spoke loudly about going into the sea; to seed ... Does she really have the courage to follow Theo? Is that, in the end, her destiny?

She realises that she must ask for an extension of the deadline. The dead line. Is that where she is going with Eric? If she followed Theo, then, would she be following life? Which is her journey? Death or life? Life or death? Can she not lead herself?

Her head is buzzing, night has fallen, she can vaguely see her reflection in the glossy black window. The computer drones inanely. God, how she hates this machine that requires neither food nor sleep nor movement. Whose primitive mechanical capacities she must subject herself to against her better judgment. Horrified, she stares into the window. The desk light bulb's reflection blinds her. This is the common ground that underlies these books: the machine, trying to create machines! She has been on the wrong track all along. 'How does it feel to be dead?' 'How does it feel to obey the demands of a machine?' Those are the questions she ought to have asked and for which she ought to have found qualified respondents. Herself, in the first instance.

The insight awakens new life in her. Her chains are no more than plaintive, daily need for money. Hah! From now on, she will live on purest air. Breathing heavily, she turns back to the computer. Within fifteen minutes, she has erased all her work from the past six months. The machine's unceremonious capacity completely to obliterate at a moment's notice is marvellous. Manja is crying, sobbing, snot runs from her nose, she brushes it away with her sleeve and continues the destruction. She is exiling herself voluntarily.

She shuts down the system. The electric crackling as the hum subsides brings great relief: pure silence.

No, not pure. It is the silence of a windy night impressing upon her a more elemental song.

She takes her printouts, switches off the desk lamp, and feels her way to the dim light that is on in the lounge. The dog scratches and whines at the kitchen door as she passes through the bedroom. Manja lets her in. She sniffs and whinnies with joy as Manja forms her papers into balls and places them carefully into the jetmaster on the north side of the room. Manja lights the balls and sits herself down, her arm around Ruby, who is more than delighted to be an accomplice to this act. The fire flares brightly. Then the flames diminish, quiver and are absorbed by the disintegrating black flakes in the fireplace.

Manja looks over her shoulder at the two pastelled brothers on the wall behind her. Ruby follows her gaze. In the dim, red light Manja can make out only one and it is at him that she directs a loyal stare.

Manja re-settles Ruby in her basket; then withdraws to her own room by the light of the moon. It creates a misty luminescence in the house,

shining through mercurial flights of cloud. Tonight it is full and a wild southeaster has resumed, sweeping not away, but tearing inside out and into unrecognisable shapes all the old, useless thoughts and feelings.

University of Cape Town

Chapter 26 Confession

As the moon wanes, rising later each night, Manja sifts through Theo's scribblings. She is in no hurry to communicate her extreme action to Eric. She defends herself against feelings of obligation by single-mindedly tracking his brother's spoor and, more often than not, answering it with notices of her own. She becomes so absorbed in this task as to feel her spirit to be in a state of near-departure from the everyday world. She is losing a normal sense of perspective. The fact that she has disrespectfully erased work for which she has been paid not indecent sums of money each month seems increasingly trivial - something which it takes four days to convince herself will be blown away by the wind without anybody ever knowing or indeed caring.

She reads: 'Something is forming that pushes me so, something I hear, scraps that appear'. Theo's anonymous tone agrees with her own state. Beside his words she scratches: 'Lies and unburied natural tales. Pythons of fish strung on lines, pulled through the sand by a worried man. Purple berries in noon dunes, sun-sweet on numberless tongues.' 'I must go to sleep,' she thinks. Her head is brimming with words, a cacophony of phrases. She marks the present (cardboard) page and lays it on the heap to her left, turning it over briefly to check for signs on the back.

There are words painted in black gouache. 'I am only a road on which is transported the traffic of others' lives, is why I was & remain subject to madness, a madness that recognises itself, the salvation of madness.'

Beside the words are a naked woman, and a weeping crow.

Unbidden tears spring into Manja's eyes at the sight of the image. She represses and squints through them. Reading Theo's handwriting strains her eyes, her mind. Most of his words are put down in the same thick, soft pencils or charcoal that he used for sketching. At times, the marks are brushed, as here, but often they are so faint, or smudged, that she cannot make sense of them at all. Is she betraying his soul? Is she herself a road, transporting him, his words? Whereto? Where is this leading?

The little downstairs room where she is sitting seems to swirl with energies, presences strange to her. Theo must have slept here, too. Her

arms begin to quiver. Slowly she looks about her. Everything is infused by breath, as it seems, alive in the moment. The difference between herself and Theo seems, suddenly, a joyous opportunity to merge. She actually gropes her way up the stairs to look at the portrait. Is he -? No, merely a blank child. Nothing from the kitchen photograph, either. Disappointed, Manja descends again, more curious than afraid. Theo's papers glow with a creamy light; the sight warms her. Around them, insubstantial dancing. Manja remains quite still. She must not provoke these energies, who- or whatever they are. Let them have their movement and their say.

When the shadows dissipate, she undresses carefully and gets into bed. Now the room is dark. Open-eyed she lies, watching faint blues sweep musically overhead in the otherwise colourless universe of night. As they subside Manja calms, feeling strangely grateful, and falls into deep sleep.

A sudden hammering in the heart wakes her. There is clanging in her head, a pulse to words perfectly clear. She fights the urge to rise and record them, but the beat is so insistent that she relents and scribbles on one of Theo's quires:

'Words are bells that keep on ringing, that force us to the church of soul. Their messages are dreams on pillows, once lived, forgotten now.' Manja looks up into the black mirror of the sliding door; then continues:

'The body is sleep's servant. Sleep is a waking state. Sleep is the art of remembering what the heart once ate, and what it cried. What it listened to and what it lied. I am asleep now,' she adds.

She returns to bed. It takes ages before she becomes unconscious again. When she wakes, the room is filled with light. It is late. To her surprise, Eric is sitting on the side of her bed, smiling at her. "Is today Saturday?" she asks, trying to orient herself. She is not a good communicator following sleep. She needs time to push through the membranes of the dark cocoon.

Eric nods. Saturday - day of Saturn. Saturnalia. Saturnine.

"Yes," smiles Eric, "you slept in. It's past ten o'clock. Did you work late last night, my little chicken?"

She feels disarmed by this bizarre term of endearment which he has used before. She rubs her eyes.

"Tweet," she says.

Eric runs his hands through her hair and covers her face with it. He lays himself awkwardly upon her. How distant her soul is from him. He does not know how far she has travelled since he saw her last. Inexplicably, she is seized with a desire for him that shames her, but she does not resist it. Hot, soft and sleepy she gobbles him up and in the intense concentration which this affords, she is gradually liberated of weight and matter. On his feet in the room he holds her as she flies on the swell of his tide, out into the garden to the sky. The power in his body directs her. She is brought to life and soars, held by a miraculous movement, a dancing in the womb that rises, reaches and rolls through the very petals round the axis of the world.

Eric sits beside the Arum lilies and has a cigarette. 'Why does he not make an effort to stop this pretentious, idle habit?' thinks Manja as she goes to shower. She wishes that it were all already over, that she had made her confession. She is in a rude state of excitement that she knows is totally inappropriate. She ought to be humble and remorseful. The water washes powerfully over her. She has done the right thing, of that she is certain. But where to now? Terror awakens within her. She scrunches her face against the water's pressure. Doomed. Her destiny is to waste herself, to be wasted.

She emerges from the cubicle to see Eric near the desk, upon which last night's scribbles and all of Theo's scraps lie defenceless.

"No!" she cries, "don't look at that!"

She hurries to the desk and stacks everything in a heap under a blank piece of paper. This offends Eric.

"Why do you behave like this?" he asks, "These are my brother's. Not only yours."

The towel has slid off her, she feels hideously exposed. She picks it up and holds it against her. Eric gives her a half-alarmed, half-puzzled stare and moves to the bed where he sits down. He does not want a scene, she can see. He is still pink, infused with the force of life, their morning's dance. Can it be? How is it that she falls from ecstasy to despair without warning, without time passing between one state and the next?

She stuffs the papers into the cupboard and bangs shut the cupboard door. "Good riddance!" What must be seen as contradictoriness amazes even her, but she does not question it. The point is, she must protect

Theo, and this end surely justifies all means. 'I am still a fighter in the Struggle,' she thinks, hiding a tiny smile, 'though I am now a solitary outpost, a night guard among invisible frogs and crickets. Listening out for the tunes of darkness, knowing they come down the same river as does daytime.'

"Come," says Eric and takes her hand. Yes, she will give herself to him who can create order and peace. Let him take over for now. She could be his wife. She has a sudden fantasy of hanging up his washing in the sun. Despite everything, her heart yearns for stability. She will have to find ways of unifying the disparate - this man: "I think we both need breakfast" - and his brother, each tugging at a part of her. Her war, perhaps, stems from a desire to end all wars. The price, no doubt, will be herself. Price and prize agglomerated in the returning question: life or death? This is surely not a question reserved for men alone. Is it for pupate women, though, as they prepare to crack chrysalis shields, to have a hand upon each wing, each side, and join repelling forces back into carpets, pot holders, skeins of one sort or another? Who can do that other than she who follows nature's laws, wherever those may lead?

They go to the only restaurant in town, overlooking the yacht basin. Though windy, it is a warm day and they are glad to find an outside table being vacated when they arrive. Eric was right: she is ravenous and orders a full English breakfast for the first time in her life. "So," says Eric heartily as he tucks into a foamy omelette. His eyes are like honey agate - so orange is their brown. Her own eyes burn, she feels like the devil beside him. 'Deliver me,' she thinks, looking straight at him, 'from myself.'

Eric stops chewing and breaks into a coy smile.

"What are you thinking?" he says.

Manja does not return the smile. "I am thinking that I love you," she says, "and I am thinking that this is the end."

She is not certain that Eric's smile disappears completely. He finishes chewing. Slowly he separates another piece of omelette.

"Perhaps you could explain," he says, "is there a need to be so mysterious?" He places the food inside his mouth.

"I have done something terrible," she says. She pushes aside the pork sausage which is disgustingly pale and squishy and tastes awful.

Eric continues eating quite calmly. Then he sits back and sighs. "Manja, my dear, if you need another extension of the deadline - well, to be honest, you can have it. It's not for me alone to make that decision, but believe me, there won't be a problem. We work to a 'Hurry up and wait' formula." He offers a brief grin before continuing. "By all means, for your own sake, try to finish up as soon as you can. How about end November? Will that do? And if you think," he goes on, "that my feelings for you are determined by how well you obey the deadlines - then let me tell you that you are wrong!"

Manja stares at his self-congratulatory smile. "But I think I have done something which -." The words will not come. What has she done? "It's not," she continues, "I don't need an extension."

The unbidden feeling of wild excitement rises again. She begins to laugh. 'I am off my head,' she thinks, 'I have lost it. I must knit something.'

Eric is not caught. He is visibly getting irritated.

"What, then?" he asks. "Tell me."

"Let's pay," suggests Manja, "and go for a walk."

They share the bill, cross the cobbled town square to the other side of the road. They follow some steps rising over the old village to the level of the domed Mosque and its school, with a star and moon in painted relief on its forehead. Tiny children are playing near the front doors, some of which stand ajar. In the doorway of one stands a delicate old man wearing a sad, worried look. He does not respond in any way to their polite greeting. As Eric and Manja bear right, passing a nook which reeks of urine, they ascend higher past a remarkably successful cactus and a veritable ocean of flowering plumbago washing down on the other side of the railing. Just where the railing comes to an abrupt end (it is broken), there is a bench and they sit down.

"There is nothing left," says Manja, looking at her hands, "of my work. It is all deleted. I deleted all my files," she corrects herself.

"Ah," sighs Eric. It is a compassionate sound that issues from his breast. "That is terrible." He shifts on the bench. "Shame. But don't worry. You've a hard copy, don't you?"

Manja shakes her head. "I burnt it."

"You burnt it? You burnt the hard copy?"

"Yes."

"You put a match to all of the work. You burnt 'Common Ground'?"

"Yes."

"Are you crazy?"

Manja is silent.

"Let me get this straight. You deliberately deleted your files from the computer. Then you purposely burned your manuscript. Have I got it? Is that what happened?"

Manja nods. She stares at the railing before her, its hollow visible between frayed teeth of metal pipe.

"Without a thought for the people you would be letting down," states Eric, "I can't believe it. You are insane."

She follows his stare at the sea, the yachts, the ugly brick-red Navy offices, high walls with numerous small windows, all identical. Then he returns his gaze to Manja.

"You deserve a spanking."

He is not joking.

"What possessed you? How can you be so irresponsible?"

She lifts her eyes.

"Do you think we could go to the waterfall? There is a waterfall in the kloof there." She points meekly. Then she gets up.

He is taken aback and pulls her arm.

"This is unacceptable, Manja. I will not have it. You owe me an explanation. You may not leave me to sort out this mess on my own. I will not, I tell you!"

"Please," she says, "come with me to the waterfall. I ask as a friend. Are you my friend?"

"I am not letting you off," he insists, "you are going to make good."

But he lets her take his hand. He follows her further up. She walks quickly and soon he must stop to catch his breath. Then on into the kloof. The path leads through a forest of bluegums and wattles.

Alongside it bloom grasses and sour clover. Eventually they reach a promontory from where the yacht basin and harbour are once again visible. Below them, in the kloof on their left, thunders the waterfall.

"Look," says Eric panting. He lights a cigarette as they stand. "You could re-write the book by the end of the year."

"Yes," says Manja impassively, "I could do that."

She returns to the path. As it curves round to reveal the narrow gorge with its gushing communications, a large bird of prey is disturbed by

their tread. Clumsily it lifts off from its leafy perch. Its wings pump noisily and propel it heavily away. They push on upon the stony path until they reach the wall of rock, partly fashioned by human hands in the hard, high cleft of purple, cobalt, iron, lichenous white and green. The fall of the water is deafening.

"This is why!" she screams at Eric over the noise. "This is why I did what I did. This is my book. It has already been written!"

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PART 3

MANJA FINDS HER ELEMENT

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Manja forsakes her monthly salary with immediate effect and agrees to re-draft her book in the form of annotated chapter outlines, in order that another writer, yet to be found, shall be able soundly to weave together the plan into a whole. It is not difficult for her to fulfil this part of the new bargain. At least, she need not now prostitute language, shoving words about on the page as if they were meant to be bent by surface designs. Yet she cannot defend herself against a furious bitterness that somebody else shall be paid to do so; and if they do not, that the editor will see to it that all is cropped and evened, rendered horribly accessible, altogether beyond redemption. As she sits in such relentless judgment of her colleagues, she cannot but admit a poverty of spirit in herself. She experiences extended flashes of hatred against, rather than compassion for the other writers, the editors and publishers. They are obviously so anxious to pay their bills and bonds, to feed their families and run their cars that it seems they had lost all faith in life, indeed, as if they believed in nothing at all, not even their very selves. This is not her world, her reality. She is nauseated by these seemingly exclusive anxieties over material well-being.

It no longer matters to her what may be the circumstances - poor or wealthy, communal or alone - whence such anxieties spring. When she thinks of Eric, she cannot help but observe defeat by Fear - of the impossibility of life in the long (or indeed the short) run. Has this fear really left him no option other than to sell out? Rather than continuing to answer to the need that children and teachers may have to raise their own morale and to nourish their hungry souls, does he not now merely use this need in order to sustain a host of parasites - including himself? Parasites who, with few exceptions, build paper walls of money around themselves, so pulling up the drawbridge against the questions: What if you get sick? What if you are injured? What if you die? In this way they desperately, yet apparently quite reasonably, butter over their terror of existence, which is expected to slither into eventual decrepitude, rather than reaching towards something vital or, indeed, necessary.

By comparison, socialists (such as Gila and Willem) do not fare much better according to Manja's judgment. For all their undeniable

strengths they, too, were and no doubt still are, overly concerned with what is imminently measurable and demonstrable. Do not even Willem's recent articles - for all their hot dunes and purple berries - 'sell out' to the grand (clearly illusory) plans to 'bring under one roof all stakeholders'? He is good enough to quote an old man's nightmare fantasy, but does he himself hear the python hissing? It does not threaten him - he need not bother to look for it under his own feet. Certainly, the Communist Party and their supporters' sole concern, it seems, is whether people have a roof over their heads, and food. Everybody must be literate, everybody must be employed. So long as everybody has what everybody else has. A serious confusion of justice, or fairness, with equality. Who ever asks themselves between a kilo of gold and a kilo of feathers which is the heavier? As if humanity were in the first place mechanisms - bodies (same needs and urges) rather than radically unequal souls trailing absolutely distinct prints on their overlapping, criss-crossing, interfering paths to the centre of self-knowledge.

No - they both pay lip service to grand dreams, but in truth both socialism and capitalism are mental orders by means of which humanity bows to the dictum that only what is formed already is to be worthy of trust. Oh, wretchedness of spirit, Dark Age! The soul, creative life energy, daemon - whatever name be granted the Unknown (give it a big U, said Han) - surely it is all beginning and all end? If not, why do we bother to be at all?

In the midst of these solitary judgments, however, Manja feels herself drawn ever further into the abyss. Moneyless, futureless, soon to turn thirty she has nothing, nothing to show for her life. She sits at the narrow bureau, looks out into the Griffins' well-kempt, though yellowing patch of lawn that lies in the bushes' permanent embrace. An aloe is blooming out of season in rude red towards the left, beside some agapanthus not yet flowering. Miserably, Manja opens the sliding door. She knows the garden is there, but it is as if she can neither see nor touch it. She sits on the dry grass a blind woman with only inward thoughts. The idea of running to her father fills her with a searing shame. She would rather walk into the sea, oh yes. Would Eric ever wish to support her? It is an inadmissible thought, in this age. She is achingly infused with the stuff of fairytale fantasy - can

reality not relent, help to give herself over to Eric, her protector and leader who will make decisions for her so that she should be able, at last, simply to be? To fill the house with flowers and freshly baked bread, to iron the shirts that cover his body and write him poems to be read by fire in the evening? Finally children, to make her normal, ordinary, just like any other woman. So cheap are her desires. She knows that she is not destined for a submissive life with another. As if anybody were! Tears spring up in her eyes as she realises her own self-pity. She rolls onto her stomach and bleats into the stubble. The closure of her eyes awakens the other senses. A whirring just above her head. She lifts her neck. A male sunbird has come so close she could touch him if she reached out her arm. He has not noticed her, is shuffling full of anticipation upon the aloe flower stalk, which is bowed from the sheer weight of honey in its chalice. Manja notices with interest that he is not inserting his long beak into the bloom's scarlet tube, but pierces it at the base. His head tilts back as he swallows greedily, drinking the nectar whose taste she knows is deliciously sweet. She props herself up on her elbows. The movement stops him, but pure insatiability gets the better of him and he finds the source of his pleasure again, irradiating his brilliant body sip for sip with nourishment.

'Look at the birds' - the words come unbidden into her head in the voice of one of her first teachers - 'do they worry about tomorrow? No. They know that the Lord will provide.'

She remembers the teacher: a tall, crow-like woman whom she first adored, then later scorned for her childlike creeds and simple bible-stories with their only too obvious lessons.

Manja lowers her head. Soil is visible between the blades of grass. She needs this tiny bird above, she needs the ancient words accompanying it now, for she is empty as this turf, has nothing more to give to anyone. The sunbird gone, she plucks one of the florets, notes the dark spot where she believes his beak went in, then sucks the Nothingness behind.

Presently, she gathers herself up, locks the house and drives through the town with its pillared façades, past the station where two trains are waiting. They are no longer darkly red, but bear diagonal grey and yellow stripes: annunciation of the country's now privately run railroad system. Up Red Hill Road, winding this way and that, she

finally hobbles again over the gnarled tree roots. She tramps to Lewanna Minnaar's open front door. Upon the chair to Christ's right, where Irene's place had been before, sits a young, slender man. When Manja raps, a sinewy, middle-aged woman emerges from the opposite corner.

Manja introduces herself. The woman peers at her with what Manja takes to be a degree of friendliness.

"Irene is not here," she declares.

"Or Lewanna Minnaar," Manja says.

"That's my mother," replies the woman, "she sleeps." She beckons towards the dark chamber of the bedroom. Then she says, "I don't know if you want to wait for her; you can do that."

Manja hesitates. "You are her daughter?"

"Lewanna Minnaar's daughter, yes. Emily is my name. That's my brother, Duncan."

The brother's head lifts. There is an extraordinary youthfulness about him. His eyes are glazed. She is sure there is a whiff of spirits on Emily's breath.

There is a faint call from the bedroom and a moment later Lewanna glides into the room on knuckled bare feet, hands clasped beneath her loose, limp breasts in a faded pink tunic, head inclined angelically. Her face expands when she sees Manja. She is helped into her chair by Emily, who also fetches and slips on her mother's shoes. Manja sits down in her old place, beneath the mulatto girl.

"Irene is not here," Lewanna says.

"Do you know when she will be back?" asks Manja, knowing the answer.

"Nee." Lewanna shakes her head for a long time.

They sit.

"How is it going with Mevrouw?" Manja addresses Lewanna.

Lewanna smiles, gazes beatifically at her, but remains silent.

"That is her," Emily says, "there behind Mevrouw."

Manja turns around.

"What?" she says, "no, really?" She laughs happily. The olive princess is Mrs Minnaar! Mrs Minnaar laughs herself, they all laugh.

Then the brother, Duncan, sits up. He holds his knees with slim, yellow-brown hands upon which blue veins run like rivers, as far as his long fingers.

"When you walk here," he says, "people do not know. There is much they do not know that I can say."

Manja gazes briefly at Duncan. She senses a sharp, jagged energy in him, seemingly suppressed by sloth (he sits on his spine) and, most likely, drinking.

"On a day," Duncan says, "the bush was burning. Only the one bush." Emily is nodding.

"And when you took a donkey to the Point," continues Duncan, "he stopped walking with his hair stood up and there is nothing you can do. I did take him there one day. It's ghosts," he says emphatically, "you know ghosts, Mevrouw?" He looks fresh, animated.

"Aah," murmurs Lewanna, "Abraham, ja." Her face crinkles ever so slightly.

"The donkey's name was Abraham," interjects Emily helpfully.

"Please excuse me," interrupts Manja, getting up, "I have to find Mrs van Vuuren. I have to tell her something."

It is not that she disbelieves the claims. Indeed, it is her belief in them that makes her edgy. She is not used to communal acceptance of a world beyond. She takes it for granted that such perceptions are an isolating feature, separating her categorically from others.

"I shall help you," says Duncan, also rising, "I know where she went."

"No thank you," says Manja, "maybe another day."

"Leave the woman," says Emily to Duncan, who is holding Manja's arm and grinning.

"Yes," he says, "Mevrouw knows, I am a handyman. I do any kind of work. Anything you need. Do you not maybe want a gardener? I will make it lekker just for you, you'll see."

"That would be nice," replies Manja wistfully. Is this her prince, sent to sweep her off her feet by way of a heavenly Joke? "Unfortunately I have no house and garden. I am going - "

"I can make it! Look at these hands. Listen, Lady, I'll build you. I'll build you a house, three bedrooms - "

Manja laughs brassily. "I don't want three bedrooms, I want a castle," she shouts. "With a spook," she adds. "Turrets and towers from where I can watch you fish fish and sharks snapping seals en watnog."

Everybody cackles and Manja runs off down the hill, past a gutted ruin on her left. There was a terrible fire here several summers ago. Her heart aches childishly for Irene. Soon, she is embraced by prickly

vegetation, seeming to hold its breath in what has turned out to be a hot day. She will never find the woman here. She clammers onto a rock. Nothing, only the Navy masts and buildings at the foot of the next hill. Otherwise bush, sand, silence.

Hot with failure, she must return. As she passes the front door of Lewanna's little house, Duncan re-emerges, followed closely by Emily. "Lady," he says, "I wonder, maybe you have a little something for me. Five rand, or two is also fine."

His skin is golden, his face fine-boned. There is a small scar beside his eye. His frame is so lithe as to give the initial impression of a body that is free. Only his breath smells poisonous.

"No," says Manja, "sorry."

"Lady, tell me where you live," he presses on, "I can fix anything!"

"I don't," replies Manja rather plaintively, "have a house. And I can't pay you for work."

Duncan eyes her skeptically. He takes Manja's shoulder resolutely. "She is a beautiful queen of the castle," he announces to Emily, who does not cackle this time. His grip is extremely tight-fingered. Manja gets into Eric's little Renault and starts the motor, forcing Duncan to step back. Emily and Lewanna are still watching her. They wave. Manja waves. Duncan waves. The whole enterprise has been a disaster. She is a dispensable entity with no obligations to fulfil. She does not even have a mother on whose calloused feet she can put shoes.

Hardly has she driven twenty metres than she sees a tall, stooped figure with a cap emerge at the roadside. It comes from between scorched black stalks with their young green shoots on napes of snow-white sand.

She is too dull and timid to stop, whirs past, brakes after all, reverses, jumps out with the engine still running and the door wide open and cries out:

"Mevrou! Mevrou van Vuuren!"

The woman does not hear her. She looks left to cross the road. Sees her and stops. Manja runs up to Irene laughing, out of breath.

"Ek het Mevrou gesoek!" she pants, "I was there," she points, "I looked for you in the veld, but Mevrou wasn't there."

"Nee, Nooi," says Irene, somewhat bewildered, almost crossly, "I was

but this side, you should have come this side."

Water pours out of her eyes. The Rain Queen. She puts down her plastic bag, takes Manja's shoulders and kisses her hard and wet direct onto her lips.

"Nooi came again," she says jubilantly, picking up the packet, "I said mos the other day to Sussie still, you can but ask her gerus, I said Nooi will come again. She has not forgotten us two alone there. Listen," she continues, "I ask Nooi, can I go with Nooi in that car? I want to go kloof-toe, Baskloof. There's my daughter there below. If Nooi is not too busy," she adds, a little restrained.

"Yes, Mevrouw can but climb in now," replies Manja, "because no, I am not busy."

Irene has almost to fold herself double to get into the passenger seat. Her coarse, white hair sticks out in a ring from under her man's cap. She smells faintly of spirits and speaks relentlessly.

As the car takes the extreme curves, her torso leans into them, left, right, holding imaginary handlebars, grinning, speaking.

"There live Mavis and Emily, Sussie's daughters both," she says, pointing to a huge rock that Manja notices for the first time marks the entrance of an informal settlement. From the road, numerous rooftops are visible between the trees.

"I had a bicycle," continues Irene, "when I was young, then I came down, here round, there round so -."

At the bottom of the hill the road forks and Irene instructs Manja to keep right; then right again onto a rocky track. They pass through a gate and within seconds a small cottage is visible on the left ahead of them, across from a dry waterbed. Manja parks half-off the road.

"Come with," says Irene, "come meet my daughter Glenda."

Manja tramps behind Irene over large rustling knolls, in which some shrivelled, late nasturtiums are still blooming yellow and orange. Ahead of them, a little way from the cottage, Manja notices the foundations of a ruin and behind it the burnt out trunk of a gigantic tree.

Irene stops and points. "See, there was I born," she says, "The house burnt out with Sussie's first man, they lived there."

Irene opens the cottage's green wooden door and speaks. Shamed, Manja waits for the introduction to find an end. Here, this woman, she is writing a book about us for our children.

Glenda is an earnest woman with a doek on her small, round head and an inquiring, rather relentless gaze.

"Glenda," says Irene, "vat die vrou en wys vir haar hoe was 'it gewees daai tyd."

Glenda stands silent and unsmiling. She does not take her eyes off Manja.

"Go with her," says Irene bustling, "I shall stay just here."

"Mevrou," stammers Manja, "ek moet vir Mevrou iets sê. I lost my job."

"Hoe?" Mevrou van Vuuren seems puzzled. "Hoe sê Nooi?"

"Somebody else is writing the book."

"Hoe die duiwel -." Mevrou van Vuuren is incensed.

"No, it was my fault!"

"Nooi moenie worry nie," says Irene van Vuuren, totally ignoring Manja's show of distress, "dit sal sekerlik alles regkom."

Manja looks at the old woman. "Ek weet nie of Mevrou kan verstaan wat ek probeer om te sê nie. Maybe Mevrou is right," she adds after a pause, giving up, "I saw a little bird the other day - "

Irene van Vuuren breaks into a knobbly smile.

"Ja, Nooi can mos see, it is but so. Hier is orals voëltjies. She will show you now. Go with her."

She waves them out. All right. It is but so. What does it matter, after all? Tomorrow they may all be dead. Burnt out, drowned. Today, now, she is following after Glenda's tangy female smell.

"What is it, if you don't mind to tell me, at which you are working?" says Glenda in superb Afrikaans.

They have not yet crossed the riverbed. The sun is exploding in Manja's brain.

"I must say nothing," she replies, "it has gone bad with me."

"Do you," Glenda asks formally, "still want me to show you where are our graves and my uncle's garden?"

Manja stands irresolutely. All she can perceive is wilderness, ruins, burnt eucalyptus trees, gravel, sand. And the ghosts? Manja examines Glenda's small face with its snub, shiny nose and cheeks, her seemingly boneless form, as if she consisted of nothing but smooth muscle tissue, like a seal. Shaped by, rather than shaping, the environment. As if there were a difference.

Glenda crosses the riverbed and Manja follows her to the gravel track.

"Have you always lived by the sea?" asks Manja.

"Not always," says Glenda politely, "but most of my life, yes I have. I stayed for a time in Elandsfontein, then I returned here." She nods.

"You are lucky," says Manja sincerely.

Glenda looks at her strangely.

"I shall not say I am lucky," she replies dispassionately, "I don't know how much longer I shall stay here. A new owner bought this land a while ago," she explains. "He did not know I lived here till the fire. The bush was so eaten up, it all disappeared. Ek was so lekker versteek hier met my kinders." She issues what could be a brief smile. "Now I must pick up these pieces of glass, so that I can stay here now." She scratches in the sand and picks up some dull shards.

"He does not pay me anything," she adds and slips the shards into her apron pocket.

Glenda departs from the track and steps with graceful equilibrium between the blackened tree stumps, holding both her hands in her pockets. They reach an area vaguely demarcated by dead logs and Glenda bends down and pulls away some razor wire.

"Watch out," she says, adding, "Here are our family's graves. They all lie buried here."

Many of them are tiny - heaps of sandstone pebbles before wooden crosses with faded script. They bear witness to numerous stillborn

day-, week- and month-old van Vuuren and Minnaar babies, amongst others. 'Safe in the arms of Jesus,' is announced across one in charred, ragged letters. An image of water - is it her thirst? - embraced by foam in a vaguely breaking wave. Two blue points, or eyes. A split second, then they are gone, holes pricked by needles to see through to this reality.

"Here lies my Oom Hendrik," points Glenda, "my Aunt Lewanna's man." His oval heap of gathered stones is decorated with a perlemoen shell and an aged English milk jug, upon which is a country scene traversed by ladies in long skirts and hats on their eternal perambulation upon porcelain. Watsonias, which pierced through the ground alongside in spring, utter strawy whispers in the breeze. They still carry mute dark seed upon their stalks.

Strewn over the other graves are shards of plastic and glass, remnants of metallic bouquets in broken bubbles of transparent plastic. The largest heap of rocks is bordered by concrete. At the tip of the grave is a cement arc inscribed by hand, badly weathered.

'Onse Ma,' reads Manja, 'liefde,' 'enigste'.

"Dis my Ouma se graf," says Glenda, "my Ma se Ma. I still remember how they carried her out, I was a young girl then, no longer a child."

'I shall not die by water,' Manja thinks. There is Ophelia, and then there is Joan of Arc. She feels bizarrely as if she must lay herself on Ma's large grave. To protect it, like a shield. To shrivel, or perhaps to melt. Would she become hot with light, reflecting the fierce disc above, upon the knobs of these rough stones? Perhaps she ought to ask the new landowner if she, too, might pick glass in exchange for accommodation. Her tongue sticks to her palate; she closes her mouth and tries with her consciousness to summon spittle. She fails to ask Glenda what she does for water. There must be some plan. But it is as if the muteness of the dead compels the living to be likewise.

They return to the cottage through undifferentiated bush. At a clearing, Glenda stops and says,

"Mevrou can see, here was the gate used to be. Here had my Oom Hendrik a garden."

She points to the lines where once had been a fence, the exact spot of the grape vines, the apple tree and rows of quinces. The latter are still discernible within the high embrace of Buffalo grass. Glenda

indicates a lemon tree that is likewise fighting the odds against strangulation.

"This was his favourite lemon tree," she says, "we buried my Oom's brains there."

Manja stares at her, shocked as much by the equanimity with which Glenda sounds the words as by the content of her utterance.

"There were two houses used to be." Glenda points towards the ruin beneath the charred eucalyptus. "That one burnt down with my Oom Hendrik in and everything."

She stands quite still, playing with the shards in her pocket. From beneath her doek, pearls of sweat emerge and Manja notices tiny curls of greying hair at the temples. Her full breasts hang loose beneath a cheap synthetic top with numerous threads pulled. Surely feeling Manja's eyes upon her, Glenda's gaze darts blackly into them and holds Manja for a moment.

"It was a Saturday," she continues, "six or seven in the evening, and it was summertime - before it got lekker dark. The thing was, we were all here. We had still had a little party. My brother, his wife, my Ma, my Aunt Lewanna and her youngest boy, cousin Duncan, he was still only a laaitie, we were all together here. Then my Oom said, no, he's going off now. Then just that evening we see the house is in flames. The furniture - everything - there was nothing. Everything and everything was taken."

The sun's glare burns Manja's eyes. From the grass she hears the insects' monotonous, high-pitched whirr.

"They found him lying with his arms crossed over so," says Glenda, "but his head was split, it was open. We collected the pieces that we found of his brain; we put it in a tin so. Then we buried it here, here where we stand now. It was his favourite tree."

Glenda pauses. Manja's hair is a cap of molten metal on her head. She looks at Glenda and there travels something between them that is neither good nor bad, neither right nor wrong. It feels completely empty, razed. Manja can make no comparisons between her own situation and that of Glenda's family. But neither can she maintain innocence. She has asked, and been called, to be entered by the knowledge of decades of their pain.

In the cottage with its makeshift shelves and hardboard door into the bedroom, they discover that Irene has fallen asleep. Manja catches a

glimpse of her big, long body lying on a blanket of squares that hangs over the bed. She snores softly. Her face has fallen into the skull, she looks completely eaten.

"The children shall come home now-now from school," says Glenda, offering an unambiguous smile for the first time.

She walks halfway with Manja to the car, turns when Manja starts the motor. She steps over the knolls with her hands in her apron, turns again at the door of the remaining house and stares until her form disappears behind a mound of gravel.

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Manja has less than two months in which to find both alternative accommodation and employment. With the year end nighing, the latter especially is a hopeless prospect. She has not told any of this to Oliver, who phones her every two to three months. Indeed, she has lied outright by telling him that Hardy and Strutt have instituted an across-the-board extension of contracts for 'Common Ground' writers. She is secure in the knowledge that Oliver cannot begin to appreciate the course that her life seems to be taking. She may as well have sailed away on a ship all those years ago and he ought to have accepted that then as his daughter's inevitable way. As it is, their relationship seems to be sustained on an edifice of falsehoods, which requires no less and no more than ongoing deception to prop it up. She scans the Classifieds, makes phone calls and sends off numerous, unsuccessful application letters.

Then she is invited to an interview with a union on the lookout for a Literacy Worker. She arrives in her only 'decent outfit' to find that, apart from the fact that all the other applicants are male, they are mostly dressed in casual wear. One sports a dark canvas shirt and pants tucked into black, military-style boots which, with his cap on top of his head, lend him the authentic style of a Bolshevik imported into the present straight from 1917. He has a great deal to say, and is good enough to say it all, while they wait for two hours for the interviewers.

Beside Manja is a quiet, clean-shaven man in a pale yellow shirt and tie. It turns out that he is a teacher from Bredasdorp where, he tells Manja shyly, there were no less than a hundred rainbows during the previous autumn, daily spanning the Breede River at Malgas and beyond, as if in concert with the beautiful and hopeful event that took place in our country at that time.

When Manja's turn arrives for the grilling, she knows the moment she enters the designated room that her dress speaks against her. Together with the interviewers, however, she goes obediently through the motions, until one asks the question:

"And what do you think of gender?"

"What do I think of gender?" Manja smiles with surprise. Then she utters the words:

"Gender, yes - some of us are women. Some of us are men!"

Some in the panel of people before her rise on their spines, others sink back attentively. Thus they unite to form a barbed enclosure.

"A tree," she says, knowing she has lost the game, "has a root, branches, a stem and a crown. It has flowers, bears fruit. You know? I mean nothing is - "

She wants to say 'more important'; instead, she falls silent. Somehow, soon afterwards, she gets up.

"Thank you very much," she squeaks.

They nod in total agreement.

Manja now telephones for positions far beyond her experience and capacity, such as 'Manageress of Restaurant' and 'Au Pair'. She will waitress, but her age, total inexperience and, she believes, her anxiety which she struggles increasingly to conceal, ensure repeated failure. She bakes breads and biscuits for a local shop, but she loses money in this way, possibly because she does not buy her ingredients in bulk. She procures paints for R80, decorates stones from the beach with them and displays them from her satchel to shop owners and residents in the area. Eventually she sells a large one for R40 before giving up on account of her aching back. 'At least,' she thinks, 'Sisyphus rolled his boulder before him.' But she stops short of purchasing a wheelbarrow to push like poor sweet Molly Malone.

Her last spare money she spends on a sample of t-shirts in various bright colours, has her own designs silk-screened thereon and rents a stall at a nearby flea market. Sitting under the Griffin's garden umbrella for one day she does nothing but watch people idling by. The following week she drags herself once again from shop to shop with a packet-full of her decorated cotton ware. She is delighted to sell four out of twenty. Then she gives a shirt to Eric as a gift; one is folded and sent in a padded envelope to Oliver Levsky in Benoni; one each given to Nursie and gardener William. The rest are stashed away at the back of the cupboard.

As she closes the cupboard door, Manja hears a rude knock upstairs. She has never yet had visitors in all the time that she has stayed in Rocklands Road. In a sudden state of panic, she considers ignoring it, but the knock repeats itself. Reluctantly, she tiptoes up the steps, at

the top of which again she hesitates. The Griffin's wooden duck hangs from the ceiling opposite the sofa. Its wings breathe languidly in the through-draft. To its right, close beside Manja's arm, child-Eric and child-Theo gaze out from behind their translucent panes, their eyes chalky and expressionless. There is a third knock, less demanding this time, then a boggy cough and movement behind the door. Manja strides down the corridor, turns the key in the lock and presses down the heavy brass handle of the front door.

Before her stands Giles Moore with his back to her. Awkwardly, he turns his head, then shuffles slowly round and past her into the house. She fears at every step that he will trip, but miraculously he makes it into the lounge where he falls into the sofa with a massive groan, then looks intently at the duck.

"I thought you weren't going to open," he says, "do you regularly let your visitors stand waiting outside? I knew you were home, because the car is there."

"I could have been out walking," replies Manja defensively, "and I don't usually get visitors."

"Never mind," wheezes Giles, "I'm glad to be sitting down. Could I have some tea, please?"

What a gross entity this old man is. Since she last saw him he is looking the worse for wear. Beneath the purplish net of veins that cover the skin on his face is an unsettling paleness. With his nicotine-stained fingers he removes his cap and brushes over his scalp. He has had a haircut. His white hedgerows are gone, replaced by some greyish, gelled-back strands. His feet, notices Manja, are bare in flip-flops. His toenails need cutting. She shudders, rises and prepares tea in the kitchen.

While the water works its way to boiling point, her gaze is pulled towards the portrait of Theo with its sidelong glance, his eyes that cannot be met. She sits down at the kitchen table, as much as possible in his line of vision, and stares back until the kettle clicks. She hears Giles coughing and hawking. She brings him the tea on a little ironwood tray and seats herself on the pouffe before the fireplace. Giles has a cold. He blows his nose into a handkerchief which he returns to his trouser pocket with difficulty.

"I came," he says finally. Manja can hear the words struggle past hindrances in his throat. "Because," continues Giles, "I want to

apologise. I did not mean to evict you from my flat," he says, "I did not intend to upset you. Because I did upset you."

"I had forgotten it," replies Manja, "that whole day, actually, was crazy if I think back. My whole life has been very - " she searches for the right word - "irregular. That morning was just a part of it, I think."

"I don't know what your life has or has not been," replies Giles without compassion, "but I wanted to say what I said. It's my own fault."

"Oh," says Manja, frowning.

"You must surely know," continues Giles, "that the new Constitution has included a clause which states they are going to have a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. I think they want to call it that."

Manja nods. She is too ashamed to say that she has not been following the newspapers very closely.

"It's a very good thing," says Giles, "in my opinion. We shouldn't get away with what we have done. In fact, one can't. You live with the choices you make for the rest of your life."

He shifts on the sofa, extracts his handkerchief and cleans his nose.

"I understand that, perhaps," replies Manja, feeling slightly anxious. She does not want to get onto the topic of Giles' wife again. "I deleted all my files. I resigned from my job, you could say," she explains.

Giles drinks up his tea. "I'm not talking about you," he says. "You are young and talented and basically have no problems. Except that you think too much about yourself." He wipes his dripping nose.

Manja strikes him an angry glance. Giles smirks.

"I did not come here to fight," he says, "but I prefer to be honest. People are hypocritical."

"There are ways and ways of being honest," retorts Manja.

Giles sets aside his cup. His torso moves within. Then he emits a raucous grunt and somehow gets himself into a standing position.

"Where is the toilet?" he says and stutters over to where Manja indicates, second door on the right, without once lifting his feet. He does not close the door. Manja, returning the teacups to the kitchen, sees him fiddle with his fly and urinate from his not inconsiderable

height while supporting himself against the wall with his one hand. Never before has Manja encountered so indecorous a being. And yet: there is something about him that draws her. His whiskers, which he has partly removed, are more like scum upon the sea, she thinks, than a ship-captain's rugged fleece. Indeed, Giles' eyes themselves are scummy - a peculiar, dirty, whitish brown. Why is she being surrounded so by fallen creatures, people with grievous pasts and no futures?

"I'm moving out of here soon," she announces when Giles returns, "and I don't know where I'll go. I could maybe go and live with my - um, boyfriend, but I don't want to. We are not right for one another." They move onto the balcony, where Giles lights a cigarette.

"That is sad," he says, "this place is very nice, quite grand." "It belongs to my - um, boyfriend's parents, yes. They went away to recover. Their one son drowned a couple of years ago. They are returning next month."

Giles smokes.

"So what are you going to do?" he says, blowing his nose without letting go of his cigarette.

"I don't know," says Manja, "I shall have to see."

"Anyway," says Giles, kissing his half-smoked cigarette and flicking it thoughtlessly over the balcony, "you won't make the same mistakes as me. You're too nice."

Manja looks at Giles in silence. He pulls his shirt out of his pants and scratches a dry-skinned, pinkish lower back.

"I must be off," he says, "you've got work to do."

"I do not, actually," says Manja.

"Visit me," replies Giles, "I shall show you how to make papier-mâché. Who knows where that will lead?"

"Maybe I will," says Manja as she sees him off.

Chapter 30 Freedom

Manja has caught Giles' cold. The wind has dropped and the March days are warm, but she feels a surreptitious chill in them that cuts her to the marrow. She spreads a blanket on the grass outside before the aloe with its high regiment of spears. The earth feels threateningly cool. Manja pulls over the skull and crossbones cap which she has adopted as her own and lies with her eyes closed, trying to withdraw her consciousness as much as possible.

In bed at night, her pillow smells sulphurous, her hair is unwashed, and the extended period of inactivity has robbed her of the ability to sleep deeply and unconsciously. Her head is a garbage-heap of words, phrases and sentences. She has not stopped poring over Theo's stuff. Bells that keep on ringing. Where do they come from and to what end? Eric arrives in the evening and makes her chicken broth with alphabet noodles which she slurps gratefully while he installs a heater in her room. He is incredulous that she has not been heating it and says so. "My dad always worried about the electricity bill," she explains, "we wrapped ourselves in blankets. It's a habit now. Besides, a heater makes my head thick," she says, "Cold air is better for thinking. I'm a Basotho woman," she adds, "from the highlands."

Eric snorts and shakes his head.

"You need to be warm," he says, "to get better."

"I will be moving so soon," says Manja, "I don't know why you are bothering."

"It's not a bother," retorts Eric, crawling out from under the bed where he has plugged in the extension cord. "But we must talk about this," he says, passing Manja the box of tissues from the bedside table. She dabs at her painful nose.

"You're going to have to stay with me," says Eric, "until you find your feet again."

He looks thoughtful, not particularly happy.

"You could stay here, perhaps," he continues, "but it won't be the same, of course, with my mom and dad here."

"No," says Manja, "I don't want that." She pauses. "Or we should swop places yet again. I don't think it will work for me to move into your place while you're there. It's too small."

"It would not work for long," agrees Eric, "but as a temporary measure. What other options do you have, Manja? Besides returning to Jo'burg?" "I don't know," says Manja. He is pressurising her, making her irritable. "I don't know. I wish I were a bird."

There is a pause.

"There's a movie currently on circuit," says Eric, "about freedom. It's one of a trilogy. *Blue, White and Red*, the colours of the French flag. *Red* is Fraternity, *White* Equality, and *Blue* - your bird. Liberty."

He looks at Manja. Her head is clearing. She meets the dark whiskey of his gaze, his amber from the woods. Oh, she is as dense as rock, cultureless, deprived. Mother, Liberty, where are you flown?

"Would you like to see it with me?" he says, "I'll pay."

"Yes, please" she replies. The mere prospect of being enveloped by the blackness of an auditorium is healing. Dreams flickering before her on the huge blank screen.

"Now?"

"Yes."

The film reminds her both painfully and joyfully of something which has been lacking in her life, but of which she has forcefully suppressed awareness: a piano, music, her own body before the keys. As she admits how base and mute her life has become, she drinks the blueness that dominates the screen with its recurring melodic theme between extended silences. The film's main character is a woman who has lost not her job and shelter, but her husband and only child. How tawdry Manja's woes seem by comparison, how self-inflicted. If only she could love someone or something - even if it be her work, or only a home.

Eric, she can see, is mesmerised by the show. His hand in hers has forgotten her. The light flickers on his skin, seeps in, dances on his hair, on his breast and shoulders as he concentrates.

Freshly out of hospital after the accident, the mother on the screen empties her handbag. She finds a chocolate sucker among the keys and pens and papers. The last of her dead child. She stops her emotion by eating it.

She sells the magnificent castle that she and her husband jointly owned.

She swims again and again in loud, blue water.

The film ends with a symphonic rendition of the husband's musical score whose fragments have pierced the widow's numbed mind throughout.

On the way home, Eric stops at his cottage to leave food and fresh water for Mau in the morning. She seems surprised, but not put out when Manja and Eric depart again. She is finally at home in her new abode.

They return to Rocklands Road where Eric sleeps in the guest room, while Manja snuffles down below. She wakes early and pages again through Theo's scraps as if they were a rosary. 'Solitary,' she reads, 'Like SOL, the sun. Solfège: what IS it? So La Ti Do.'

The lyrics that accompanied the music in *Blue swirl* in Manja's head.

'If I have not love,' they sang, 'I am nothing, though I speak with the tongue of angels.'

The grey morning rings with birds. Carnelian inflames the grey, then it falls behind the sun's white blaze. Manja writes:

I am only a tongue
but you are the angel
who gives wings to my words,
and my prophecies shall fail
only if I strain to break
the silver filament
that reins me in,
which you are holding
and in which you are enmeshing me.
And if I pull too hard,
too fast and blindly
I shall strangle myself
in a shroud of your making.

She gazes at the words. She has written a love poem. To whom? She dare not touch his name.

She gives the poem to Eric over breakfast.

"It is a bit derivative," she says apologetically, "from last night." Eric lays down his spoon and reads the poem. Theo looks at Eric from his place on the kitchen wall. Eric looks up at Manja with a certain approval. He rises, goes out and returns with a bible. He absorbs himself in it. Staring at Theo, Manja listens to its pleasant thump and rustle.

"I thought so," says Eric finally, "it's in Corinthians. Except, instead of 'love', like they had in the film, here they have 'charity'." He reads -

"Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my good to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing."

'I depend upon him,' thinks Manja as she watches him, 'but do I love Eric?' Even as he reads, there is no answer to this question.

Then Eric replaces the word 'charity'.

"Love never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away."

That which is in part. Seed, leaf, flower, fruit. Root, stem, crown. Great-rooted blossomer.

"The greatest of these is love," reads Eric, looking down.

Manja rises, takes their empty cereal bowls and rinses them.

"Did Theo ever have music lessons?" she asks.

"Are you still obsessed!" exclaims Eric. "He learned to play the recorder, then the flute," he declares. "My dad bought him an expensive one straight away, silver-plated. Then he stopped. He was expelled. He went down from there."

Eric closes the bible.

"Why was he expelled?"

Eric stares at Theo's picture which is at this moment totally fragmented by reflections.

"Smoking."

Eric turns to her poem and reads it quietly.

"Is it for me?" he asks.

"I don't know," says Manja. "It must be."

As the date for Amanda and Raymond Griffin's return draws nearer, Manja relinquishes all artificially constructed plans and intentions. She is utterly unable to confront the stark reality of her situation. Is she secretly counting on moving in with Eric, after all? As seductive as that notion may seem, however, it is entirely unimaginable. She has no future that she can clearly see; is grabbing at straws. On one of her walks with Ruby, a boat on a trailer passes her by, upon which 'Clear Cut' is painted in large, blue letters. She would like to believe the message is hers to strengthen her resolve, but point her in a direction the chance words, of course, cannot.

On her last morning in Rocklands Road, she gathers together her things. She fills her backpack, takes the leftover shirts she had printed. She packs Theo's papers. They make her load rather heavy. Wearing her football insignia cap, she drags her backpack up the stairs and looks out of the wide window. Cloud covers the sky. Upon the blank surface of the sea falls light. The light sleeps on the water. The water rocks the light. The mountains opposite are hardly visible behind long streaks of mist. The house is still, wooden, luminous. Manja pats Ruby and lets her out of the kitchen door. Eric is expecting to fetch her later. Manja takes a slip of paper from beside the telephone and writes:

Dear Eric, my Love

She looks at the word for a long time. Her pencil hovers. Is it a lie? Is it true? She looks about her. Then she continues:

We are not equal. Please forgive me.
I cannot live in the wood.
I am full of salt water, I shall kill you.
This is not a poem, it is the truth.
I shall find my way, I have no choice.
I will see you again.
Manja

She leaves the note weighted down by Eric's car keys on the yellowwood chest. Guilt and uncertainty stir within her. She takes another slip of

paper and writes, 'Theo's fragments are safe. M.L.' on it. She slides it into the chest, into the empty space beside the books. Then she pulls the heavy front door shut behind her.

At that moment, Manja is seized by delight. She looks up at the stark mountain behind the settlement and begins to walk. She is lost. It is a delicious sensation, a thrill, as if she were able to see and hear properly for the first time in her life.

University of Cape Town

Manja walks the five or six kilometres into town and up to the waterfall. The backpack is heavy. She sweats, but at least the exercise rids her of her inner trembling. She leaves her load in a rocky enclave, beside a lone tree. The waterfall is gone. A trickle runs down the wall that Manja is able to pull herself up on and enter the pit of boulders, orange mud and slime. She pants. She needs to eat. She crouches down and sniffs the stagnant water. Its smell is a warning to her. She breathes the water behind the smell, then she lifts her head. On her knees, listening to the hot density of rock. Manja crawls into the black shade of the cliffs. She lies down with her cheek upon their coolness.

She notices a tiny spot of mud not far from her, in her line of vision. A minute frog bathes within. He meets her gaze with a start, but stays put.

She sits up. She is aware of thirst and hunger, but their pangs are not absorbing. She feels peculiarly strengthened and refreshed, as if for a brief lapse of time she had been oblivious.

She slides down the cliffs, returns to the path. Two young, off-duty Navy recruits, hair cropped to fit their skulls, are walking towards her. What are they doing here? What day of week is it? Disturbed, she hurries to her pack which stands untouched, waiting for her like a friend. She must not be discovered; she must find a suitable place to hide from Eric. She must leave the town.

Yet she does not walk on. The thought of heaving the pack back upon her shoulders weakens her with self-pity. Or perhaps it is simple unwillingness. What is she dragging about with her? Of what use is Theo's slumping block of papers? The printed t-shirts? Even her clothes, her beads, the extra pair of shoes? The sense of adventure that gripped her two hours ago is still with her, her eyes feel clearer than ever. But her delight in their clarity has darkened. All about she senses a world of busy humans to which she does not belong at all in her idleness. Dangerously detached. That is what the word 'wild' truly means, surely - belonging to a will that is obstreperous, refuting, own? Wiled. Willed. Can she not take benefit from things as they are, bend her head and write her books, obey the trivial rules? Her lungs fill with breath, then expel the excess calmly. Knowledge seeps into

her body like nourishment. No. No. No. She forms the word silently with her lips, softly shaking her head.

Manja slides her arms into the straps of her rucksack, and belts the hip-band close. She glides down over the rough gravel, feeling supple, hungry, light. She bends to pluck some clover, but it is old and bitter. She spits it out.

Yes: she wants to overthrow the State - her own State of Being forever. Like a child she will work at growth of self, helplessly subject to change, sorrow and joy, toppling incarnation after incarnation according to a mysterious programme unfolding itself within her. Her past is sloughed. The new opening in her innards is also a new truth, a music that she does not wish to silence with the imposition of another government either inside or outside of her, with narrow calculations and directions of its own. No, no, no. Polis, politeness, policy, police. All too human, grasping, meek. For whom, after all, are the - always temporary - systems of rule made? Not for Theo, not for Irene, not for her. Not for Jolanus, not for Hanno. Even Giles, she suddenly sees, stands outside, chiding himself for not playing the polite game and yet being by nature not made to play it. And here, now, where are things going? The new constitution, yes, is a new papery order rustling with high hopes. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission will, as it seems, allow for a baring of teeth, and a shedding of dammed up brine. And the damned? What will happen to them, the thousands, the millions of evildoers? Who will wash their hands and in what waters? Who is guilty, who exempt?

Control: against the roll of tides - the tide of pleasure, nature, dancing, somersault. Against leap, wings, flight and return. 'Against love,' thinks Manja, 'against wave and crashing. Against me.'

Against Willem, against Gila, against Oliver, yes. Tears spring into her eyes at the thought of her father whom she has deceived so. In the name of what? Politesse? All vanity. There is only one person she is - or was - close to whom she can think of who can play this game and play it well. Eric, my Love. Hours ago, he was her Love. In another world - a human world. It was a farewell wish. She will not see him again. She is no longer human. She cannot speak the language. What is she then? A god? A beast?

A grasshopper chatters past her face. Its red underwings cry out in colour for a moment before the white grass swallows its plunge. She walks nimbly to return, scrambles down to a ledge where the waterfall's vertical cliff is visible from a distance. She frees herself from her load yet again. How she longs to hurl herself down here, then to catch herself on a swoop of wide wings. She feels an impulse to toss the rucksack, dead weight that it is. So full of impulses is she, yet upon none does she act! What is it that is drawing her lifeblood, scolding her so?

She passes through the bluegum forest until she is again on tar. A new house stands at the dead end, surrounded by rubble on her left. From the overhanging branch of a tree in front of the house a rope is suspended in mid-air. At the rope's limit is a thick knot tied to a smooth bough. A swing. From this vantage-point one swings over the hills opposite, one swings over the sea. Manja drops her pack and takes the knot between her legs, stands back and sweeps forward in slow, irregular spirals. She laughs involuntarily from the sheer sensation. This is surely a version of what bungee-jumpers want, parachutists, fliers of all kinds. As the swing slows, she leans back. Her hair swooshes through long grass. Her chest and stomach muscles stretch. This is what she is. A spoiled child on a swing who wants to do nothing but this. Be in suspension, alive, unburdened of everything but the body of the present. What can she do if not to possess this joy? Wash dishes, sew cushion covers, shape impulsive poems? What are the possibilities for people - pupa-esque girls - who are prepared to do anything, so long as there is no obligation to kill or hold in abeyance the soul? Is the whole source of her problem her relationship with Eric - a man about whom she feels ambiguity upon ambiguity, relentlessly? Is her private drama out here in the kloof really all to do with him? Where has Theo gone, now that she needs companionship in a quickly descending loneliness? She loops her leg over the rough seat as her mood dashes the moment. Now what?

She racks her mind for possibilities. There seem to be so few choices for her. None at all, really. All she knows for certain is that Eric's hold on her is negative, because of - his essential innocence. For he is innocent of her, fails to see her ills. He is far too generous with her, as if he were blind in some peculiar way, unwittingly causing her endless misery. Yet - and this causes no less pain - she is deeply

implicated now in carrying the burden of something repressed and despised - something contained, to a large extent, in the heavy rucksack full of silent cries. Cries silent and silenced. By Mother Nature herself when she swept Theo away into her arms forever. Away into, or away from? That is the question.

Manja goes over and puts her own arms round the bag. There is a power here that is hers. She may not be able to articulate it - but it connects to the wilderness somehow. There is a primitive desire inside her to care for something small, unheard and even, perhaps, unimportant. Why, she shall elect to marry - indeed is already married to - this cancelled, yet still far from expunged psyche. Why should she not decide to give birth to a prism of pictures and poems in honour of the mysterious union between herself and this poor, desecrated man? The endurance of her thirst and hunger, as well as the increasing clarity of her thought (perhaps they are linked), is causing her to feel strangely inspired. She tramps down the road to the station.

University of Cape Town

Eric parks his car at the lookout point on top of Red Hill. The sky could not be clearer, but the Hottentots Holland range on the other side of the bay is enveloped in a salty haze whipped up from the sea by the southeaster. To the right of the lookout is a sign: 'The House on the Hill'. Beside it is a simple line drawing expressing the same idea. Feeling angry and dejected, with Manja's note in his pocket, Eric enters the deserted pub.

"We're still in the process of getting organised," explains a pale man who seems to have taken on the position of bartender at the very moment Eric entered the house. Opposite the bar is an incongruous open shower cubicle with a silver hose coiled up on the tiles. At the huge window facing the bay are two rather worn black leather settees which, apart from two or three bar stools, offer the only seating possibility. Eric is the sole customer. He regrets having entered and would like to turn back, but he can think of no way of doing so without disappointing the bartender, who is at this moment enthusiastically describing future plans for 'The House on the Hill'. Eric agrees to have a whiskey, even though it is not yet noon, and settles somewhat resignedly in one of the leather couches.

Within minutes, a stocky man, seemingly the bartender's partner, enters from a door beside the shower cubicle. Eric and he nod at one another. He seems to understand better than his pale-faced friend Eric's desire for quiet.

Eric gazes through the distance from his post in the window box, which is rattling due to the wind. He needs to think. When he lights up his second cigarette, the barman, proffering a nervous smile, advances again, empties his ashtray and provides a clean one. Then he returns behind the counter and settles himself peacefully opposite the other man, who is at this moment bent pen in hand over some account books. It is only at Theo that Eric can remember having felt as furiously disappointed as he is with Manja now. The anger comes, he realises with an arrow of spleen as the whiskey flickers through him, from a lack of understanding. Nevertheless, one must ask oneself if perhaps there are certain things in life that are not worth the effort. True: it is difficult to face the fact that his many, genuine attempts to win Manja have been to no avail. It is unfortunate that he is in a certain sense

- let the word be 'captivated' - by her mere physical existence. Captivated, perhaps, but not enslaved. There are thousands of women with absorbing eyes. Tens of thousands with voices as low, as soothing. And gifts besides which Manja, with her brashness, will never possess. On the other hand he must admit that, in his experience, she is alone in having made things happen for him, in him. He must give that some thought. But does he really need her criticism and her questions? He glances surreptitiously at the men, notices their gentle familiarity with one another with a shameful pang of envy.

As Eric holds his glass, he sees that his hand is trembling. He is not used to drinking at this time of day. In fact, he is not used to drinking at all. What is he doing here? He ought to go. Somewhere deep inside him he feels his outrage being swamped by something else. Something emasculating and awful.

The bartender puts a second whiskey on the low table before Eric. Eric looks at him in surprise and hesitates.

"No sweat," says the barman, "take your time. It's on the house."

"I'm afraid," replies Eric. His tongue feels heavy. Surely he cannot be slurring already? He presses on deliberately. "It will do me no good. I don't mean to reject your kindness - "

The pale man, whose large, reddened eyes droop like those of a basset hound, puts up his hand.

"My apologies. Still getting used to things, see. We want word to spread about 'The House on the Hill', that's all. It's got a lot of potential. I'll bring you a Coke instead, Sir."

"Thank you. But I will be on my way."

"Are you sure? You look as if you could do with a lifting of spirits. I don't want to be rude, just concerned, Sir, we're all human, see.

Though I'll be honest and say I'm still learning the rules of conduct in our new business. Come again," he says, giving up, "and spread the word." His mouth forms a worried grin as he crosses the room, steps into the shower cubicle and picks up the shower hose.

"Got to organise that," says the second man, refusing to take Eric's money as the bartender leaves the room. "Guests are probably put off by it, though we haven't had many. You're the first, in a manner of speaking. We'll be offering accommodation soon." Like his friend, the man does not seem frequently to enjoy the opportunity of speaking to a stranger, for he continues freely. "People come from all over the world

these days, I've never seen anything like it. Curious to see how we're running things now, I s'pose. Strange, isn't it, seeing this place has always been here, and will be here long after we've all given up the ghost, not so?"

Eric nods non-committally at the man, returns to his car and feels in the pocket of his wind jacket. He extracts the ball of paper he found in the waste paper basket of Manja's room. He uncrumples it and reads her impatient, though legible scrawl: 'The Two Brothers'. He flings the paper onto the passenger seat beside him and starts the engine. The sea beyond the harbour below is flat and empty, totally ungiving. The car is rocking in the wind. Eric reverses, steers himself back onto the vergeless road and continues over the hill down the other side of the peninsula to Scarborough. He drives down Beach Road, stops, and stares through his windscreen at the churning breakers. The sea here is always wilder. Then he takes the page and reads.

The Two Brothers

Once upon a time there was a family consisting of a mother, father, and two sons. There were no daughters. It was a respectable and happy family, as the mother was mild and wholesome; the father devoted and caring; and the sons were gifted and willing. But when the children grew up, dissent came between them, for the younger son was blessed with a golden voice. His mother loved him greatly for this. The elder son had nothing that quite so impressed the mother, and he first became envious and morose, then ambitious and competitive. He performed at school, academically as well as in sport, and soon outshadowed the younger brother, who had nothing but his voice. One needs willpower to move the joys of childhood to fruition. A voice is not enough. One needs cunning and, most importantly, blessing from above.

Yet the younger brother was not put out by the other's ascent. He was, in fact, quite happy to move to the sidelines. The truth was, he disliked being praised for his singing. He had not asked for this gift. For the younger brother, nothing brought more contentment than to slip off his shoes and walk on his bare feet, winter and summer. The dirtier and colder he became, the happier he was. He forgot his family. Others thought of him as a thief, but he knew that the cheese and biscuits, the apples and carrots and chocolates in the shops were the Lord's

bounty. His hands took, his feet walked - that was his essential tune. He never asked for anything from anyone, but occasionally he hummed melodies to himself that mimicked the squeal of a window washer's cloth across a great, reflective pane; or the growl of a motorbike taking off from the crossroad when the robot turned green; or the peal of his urine into the faraway eye of a toilet bowl.

Through his mockery of social order, he caused his family to lose their respectability. He died, but they could not resurrect themselves. Abandoned to themselves, liberated from the dark stain on the family name, they found themselves songless and without so much as a scrap of understanding. The sun shone, the wind blew, a new president was inaugurated, while the mother, father and remaining son watched the weather through their windows, and the news on television, and waited for their knees to become sufficiently supple to allow them to follow the younger son down.

After several minutes, Eric becomes aware that he has been frowning throughout. The alcohol has depressed him terribly. He gazes at the scar between his fingers. A wave claps down as if in laughter. Two huge, horribly ebullient Ridgebacks advance towards the car, followed by their owner. A car alarm pulsates suddenly, possibly set off by the dogs. Eric rubs his forehead with his palm.

On his way home, by the drone of the engine, Eric tries to calm his mind. 'Dear Eric, my Love,' he thinks. The contradiction between Manja's words and her action - her entirely unanticipated departure - fills him with confusion and a thoroughly disagreeable uncertainty. Where could she be? On the train back to her father in Benoni? Hiding in shrubs on the mountain slopes, crying? Chatting up the municipal workers, laughing? To Eric's frustration, all these possible scenarios seem equally likely. She has turned him into a fool, leaving him to account for and dispose of her clothes and papers left behind at his parents' house. Beyond that, he fails to see how she could in any way benefit from this turn of events.

And now this story. Not that it comes as a surprise to him to discover whose side she is on. But here is the proof - black on white. Admittedly, she discarded it - but still: those thoughts were hers. Could she - ? Eric freezes momentarily. "I'd sooner walk into the sea," she said. Then he remembers her note: 'I will see you again', and

relaxes somewhat. But he fails to gain a grip on the situation. Back home, he reads her note over and over again, till he has a headache. He finds her love poem and pores over the last four lines:

And if I pull too hard,
too fast and blindly,
I shall strangle myself
in a shroud of your making.

When he first read them, everything was simple. The poem clearly communicated the idea that he and Manja complemented one another well and needed to show consideration to one another. At any rate, that is how he had read the poem's message. Now, however, the words have become mysterious, cloaked, stones which he is shifting mutely about on his carpet, failing utterly to establish patterns, till he is exhausted. He lies down on his mattress, absent-mindedly scratching Mau. He stares at his picture of a Thai garden for a while; as his eye moves towards the Chagall-like print of Venus, he notices a loop of ivy penetrating the walls of his house. It has not till now stood out in the darkness. He sits up with a sigh, rises and moves to his desk, where some scissors will be found. As he opens the drawer, however, one of the shells on Manja's 'rain director' brushes his neck, not for the first time. He has always tolerated it. Now he looks up, grasps the shell and yanks it forcefully. The object retaliates by bobbing up and down frantically, all parts shuddering. Eric reaches toward the ceiling, gratefully unhooks the misconstrued, misplaced mobile, and deposits it beside the fence at the bottom of the garden.

When he re-enters his cottage, he shuts his desk drawer, which for some reason is open. He flicks through his box of CDs and soon comes upon one of Manja's. *Kinderszenen, Kreisleriana*. A beautiful woman, playing, smiles towards the piano keys. He has known this all along. If it weren't for Manja's physical presence, and signs thereof, what he is being forced to experience would be a great deal easier.

He lies down again in silence. Then he notices that what he had always taken for a ray of light between the brown-haired Venus' hand at the top left of the picture, and the heart of the blue stag at bottom right, is actually a spear.

Chapter 33 The Gardens

Manja takes the train into Cape Town. By the time she arrives she is dizzy with hunger. She trudges blindly, deafly, the way in which a unicell might move in its swamp. She finds greenery amid beggars and squirrels and heeled workpeople homeward bound. They rush by in a current already solid in its force. On an empty spot of grass, Manja undoes her shoelaces, then sinks, her arm around her backpack, into an immediate and involuntary sleep.

Manja starts up on the cusp of a dream. At her feet, a figure stops in mid-motion, looking at her slyly through eyes entirely devoid of sheen. The face is puffed, bruised. The hair on its crown stands round in a lifeless halo. Guiltily, the figure crouches. Then Manja sees. Her startledness turns into an aching horror. The figure (Manja tries to think of it as a woman, but fails) has in its puttyish hands Manja's boot. As if in acceptance of defeat, the figure bares a few teeth. It is the smile of an infant: gummy, helpless, inexorably dependent. The figure leaves the boot and makes away, all the while muttering and lifting her hands as if she were in prayer.

Manja sits up. Around her, pigeons pick their way untiringly with mechanical throbs of the head. The would-be thief has slunk around a curve in the nearby path. Manja can still see her tracksuit pants behind a bush. The light in the park is golden; people are clattering by in an endless stream. Squirrels are digging in a dirt bin nearby: always on the lookout for distractions, always ready to return in an endless cycle of unconcentrated persistence, a jerky to and fro and most unfulfilling pulse.

Manja has a headache. Her bowels are pulling at themselves, they want to empty: a paradoxical retort to her failure to fill her stomach. She can still see the woman lurking behind the bush. She is in conversation with a man wearing a black cap. Are they talking about Manja? She pulls off her other boot. From her rucksack she removes some clothes and pulls over her woolly pirates' hat. She approaches the couple. The man's face, too, is spongy. His odour is so monstrous that Manja almost exclaims out loud. He looks at her genially from beneath his spiffing cap.

"Would it be all right," says Manja, addressing the woman, "for you to look after my things while I go to the toilet?"

The beggar-woman is perhaps willing to do penance, but she is taken aback by Manja's deliberate show of trust in her. She stares at Manja for a moment as if she were certain that Manja were mad. There is wariness, if not fear, in her eyes. Is this a trick at her expense? "Thank you," cries Manja and hurries towards the park restaurant between trees, slips between the staff who are taking down umbrellas, and in the closet relieves herself at last of poison, weight, anxiety. She understands now why she brought her heavy rucksack here. This filthy, peopled garden is its home. She gulps down unfresh water for a long time from the tap.

As she steps out of the restaurant in clean clothes, the sun's rays depart, taking colour with them. A small, but sharp wind blows between the sudden blue, olive and black hues of the foliage. Manja finds the woman sitting alone near her things. She rises as Manja advances.

"Here, Madam, everything is as it was," says the woman, smiling broadly and inclining her head obsequiously. Again, she gives Manja the impression that she is an infant needing nothing but swaddling, nursing, approval. Nothing but. Who will swaddle humanity when the task of caring for a single child is already too great?

"Madam must know," continues the woman, whose body smell, though it could not compete with the man's, certainly has a will of its own. "You can see for yourself - him and me here, we are as we are. I ask a few little rands."

The woman clasps her peculiarly shiny, rounded hands. She is wearing old white sandals and a worn burgundy knitwear top over her unwashed tracksuit pants. She is a great deal shorter than Manja, though her arms and breasts are ample.

"Are you asking me to pity you?" says Manja, "Because I must say I will not. Do you ask me to pity a human being? Or are you only a squirrel, forever watching what everybody else is doing?"

She has succeeded in offending the woman. She says vehemently (evidently influenced by Manja's own vigour): "I am not a squirrel. You may not call me an animal!"

"If only there were more animals in the world," replies Manja earnestly, "look at these pigeons, these squirrels. They eat garbage. You and I eat garbage. That's all they are, we are: garbage. Show me an animal, show me a human being and I will be happy. There are none, not in this world anyway. They have all been destroyed, driven out by a

combination of garbage and pity. You really like my boots, don't you?" she adds.

The woman looks at her suspiciously. Her upper lip curls unpleasantly beneath her round, blunt nose. Her man, Manja notices, has emerged again from behind the bushes. He stands on the grey bricks of the path, holding a plastic packet and watching them as the wind increases, becoming colder.

"If you want these things," says Manja, waving her hand over the bag and boots, "you can have them." Her lower abdomen feels light, driving up her belly and spine an exhilarating energy. Her feet are cold. She rummages through the sack for her sandals. She takes out Theo's papers and before she knows it the wind is playing tag with them.

"Ah!" cries Manja and then upon a lower note: "Aah!"

She watches as the woman and the man, who has set down his packet, both pursue the sheets. No sooner than they snatch a page, more are swept up. They chafe between the remaining dark-grey birds that flutter up lazily when a paper threatens to rustle them. The beggars give up their efforts when they notice that Manja is not intent on re-capturing her load. As the wind strengthens, they fall in line with Manja. The three of them stand quite still in the twilight, bearing witness to what can only be called Theo's last dance upon this earth. They make their way amid the large, rectangular snowflakes; but when Manja turns around again, the beggars help to re-gather the fragments without a murmur. They pass through the garden's gates. Sherlock (that is the name the male beggar has given to refer to himself) shoulders Manja's pack; and Mara, having stuffed her sandals in a bin, beams in the boots.

They cross Parliament and Plein Streets, then turn right into a narrower one called Hope. Manja is shivering, the wind is not letting up. They reach a major thoroughfare.

Over her shoulder she has her little satchel, which she extracted from the rucksack.

"Good-bye," says Manja, "I'm going that way." She points left: away from the city she has no desire to discover.

"No, Miss," cries Sherlock, "you come along together with us. We make a little party. Here - " he holds up his packet - "roast pigeon. For a

good deed making our hearts sing today." He bares brown dental remnants by pulling back his swollen, gleaming lips.

Despite herself, Manja pries into the packet he is holding. In it, two dead birds.

"Gee, very impressive," she says, "but no thank you."

Cars roar past them, the lights stop and start incessantly. Manja is seized with outrage. The noise and smell of the cars' exhaust fumes, the beggars' body stench - she cannot believe that she should find herself here. No wonder people no longer find it necessary to invent images of hell. It is all about - roaring, disorderly, flashing and sulphurous, attracting loose particles (such as these two hapless souls) like a vortex.

She is afraid. Afraid of lonesomeness, thirst and hunger, afraid of the coming night. Not least of all, she is afraid of the two unappetising forms before her. What is her truck with them? How could Theo bear this life? But she knows - he could bear the alternative even less. Though he must have had dealings with types such as Mara and Sherlock, she fails to find him by looking at them. He had held himself apart, his head high and his eyes burning, as if he had indeed chosen the path that he walked. Not like these two with their sheenless eyes like copper coins pressed unfortunately into the recycled clay of their faces.

She leaves them standing. There is a nastiness in the wind blowing round. It encloses her coldly in a mantle both safe and insulate, and she keeps walking.

Chapter 34 Into the Night

If she is to survive tonight, she will have to move through it. Literally. She cannot bear the idea of putting down her head just anywhere. The prospect of her body motionless frightens her. Perhaps the experience of having her shoes removed as she slept was more traumatic than she would like to admit. Even as she remembers it, she aches. As if in some way the gesture was a sign of total betrayal of her by humanity in its entirety. The beggars, or thieves, or whatever they are, obviously stand for something much larger than themselves in her consciousness - for something essentially disgraceful and unacceptable to Manja. She cannot get beyond this sense, however. Like a blind bulb in her chest it sits full of portent, yet spitefully unyielding.

Manja traverses the street at a bridge. Before her shines a tall, grey building on top of whose roof a sign reads 'Gardens Centre'. Did Paradise also perhaps have at its heart a concrete tower such as this? Is this, perhaps, after all, what Lucifer wound himself round, happily in and out of the windows? Lucifer: angel of light. Why is it he who is said to be the prince of darkness?

She plods onward up streets between cosy Victorian houses and small apartment blocks. A few windblown people are hurrying home. A mother on foot pushes a stroller with a sleeping child, milk and bread visible through a packet that hisses from the handle.

The vision reminds Manja that her period is due and the purposelessness of the endless activity in her womb hits home now with a feeling of awesome desolation. How month after month nest after bloody nest sloughs itself out of her for days at a time. Oh, to be a fat and brooding hen! Manja grits her teeth as the not so young and deliciously plump mother clatters past in harried ordinariness.

Manja ascends. The three cylindrical high-rises loom to the right ahead, lit in their numerous windows from bottom to top. In the hardening steel blue of the dusk she bears left, less and less relying upon her eyes, but following a darker compass that directs her with an inarticulate, visionless certainty. At length, she reaches the extremity of the suburb.

Manja tramps impetuously up into the black bush before her. Her 'blindness' helps her, in a way. She senses, then sees, a huge cavity which she rounds, ignoring resistance, pain, pulsing onward primitively, without feeling; even as the branches hook the threads of her jersey, as her ankles rip through looping tendrils and her cheeks are whipped by hard, dusty, sometimes spiky foliage. Eventually, an absolutely unyielding, brushy opponent bars her thighs and chest. She forces herself bullishly against the tree, against its spreading legion of shrubs that point their leaves at her like tiny blades. Ah, how she longs now to be miniscule: a mouse, a moth. She cannot see a thing. This is the night that Eric will not see, the destitute nature of her heart, which she shares with the drowned man. Her essential placelessness in the country, or any politically organised world. Her at-oneness with the beggars? The hard chill of the mountain air robs her of warmth, flexibility. She sinks down in the growth anyhow; she slips, falls, knocking her elbow against rock. Eventually she suppresses sufficient vegetation as to negotiate a hollow. It is a compromise, a submission that feels like nourishment, sweet rest. By the dim light of the stars she removes her jersey, stiffly puts on both spare shirts beneath. How cold is the summer night! She tears out some bushes (heather? buchu?) violently, injuring her hands, and wrenches a branch from the tree alongside. It crunches the atmosphere bitterly as she does so. Then she covers herself with the wood and subsides into a preconscious realm, semi-removed from cold, from the itchy pain that crawls tirelessly on her skin. Untouched, finally, by the pitilessness of this Devil's slope she turns again into rock as the waterfall kloof has taught her to do. She is aware of the highway close by, the interminable hoarse grumbles and howls of its passengers, suddenly swallowed in the yawn of a curve. Close, yet how unreachable. Manja is beyond. Passed on, insensate; albeit that still she possesses knowledge: the harbour over there, the black hole of the sea, tickled by numerous lights. So shall she die a moth, loosing her delicate dust against the blackest light: here, where she is, she is the splint in the Devil's shank. A dark and icy coupling is taking place as she feels herself dropping tombward. Ice, space, endless spaciousness. This hell, she realises dumbly, has been the object of her desire. Alone in her orbit, self-absorbed, conflagrating within Nothing, within All.

'To hell,' she thinks, but instead of agony taking hold, a percussive lightness possesses her. From there, she drops knowingly into a sort of slumber and is visited at once by dreamery, dröm.

She floats back into the deathly black of the night with its stars like a million teeth. She closes her eyes again, not daring to shift in case she might increase her discomfort on these rocks, the grainy quartz of this inhuman ground. Her sole mobility lies in her attention, a peculiar, remaining capacity not so much to stretch towards awareness, but to wait upon the fall into her own diminution.

The firmament has shifted. Orion is down. Manja's body is not going quietly. She will never be warm again.

Her bladder presses. The leaves upon her are unwelcome, indifferently cool. She tries to get up, but falls on numb stumps of feet. She tries again and falls a second time, chafing her face in the brush. She lies, listening to the tingling in her cheek like bells. Finally, with reptilian blueness, she undoes her jeans and squats to eliminate a mere drop of urine so hot that it feels solid.

'I must drink something,' she thinks, 'but where?' When will dawn break? The night is all encompassing, permanent. The harbour so far, caught up in blurry detail. From the highway, the occasional hum is still audible, as is the restless traffic in the distant city, tidal, stopping and starting forever and ever.

Manja stares at the blackness of the water in the bay. 'I am going to imagine away its salt,' she tells herself. 'This is fresh, sweet water and you are drinking it,' she orders. Her lips open and close soundlessly. Nothing. She has not the power of mind. She feels her nerves, tissues, everything contracting, departing, and forsaking her. She lies down again. There is no point in enduring. If only she could die now.

In space, a mote of dust. A moth gives in at sight of day. Manja rises, shuffles, waits. From an unknown source, strength moves her. It is not her strength renewed. It is an ancient note, a voiceless bellow from below. Blue, grey and cold before her stands the soldier - first opponent, then protector in the night: a Waboom Protea with frozen, cartilaginous leaves and a wound filled with peaks, crystals, icicles of flesh. At a short distance lies the discarded limb, bloodless and hard. Within the tree's main steely shoots are held erect a thousand sleeping cones, like downy sceptres or kieries. Manja's head bows towards the steadfast, albeit injured, senior officer. She waits. For nothing. Dismissed.

She dare not descend. She could not bear now to be seen by early risers. Yet thirst plagues her, she must at all costs now have water. She steps, stops. Steps, and stops. Above, before her, no more than twenty metres from where she beat her impossible path, is a track. She heads towards it, almost shamed that she should so easily be saved. As the stars disappear and the doom of night retreats, a white-blue breath begins to bite and spur.

Her movement, comfortable though somewhat stiff-legged on the track, involuntarily summons Manja's childhood. She recalls her father, who made her ascend hilltops, yes mountains, with him before dawn. Perhaps, after all, a return to her own innocence is possible, just as earth is turning her cheek now and blushing faintly on the hoary veld of her hair.

It is a programme of denial, of quieting the body's outrage through rhythm, movement, this unforgettable loping of muscle, music and twine. Manja's legs pump on; she calls up Mara in her boots, smiles, and draws the woman's image as if by a shoestring towards her. Return: it is a dance of mirth.

She walks rapidly and now the sun floods through a smear of clouds. No, not the sun - vision itself hops, tinkles and skips with the smallest feet on the whitish brine around the berg. Here is a rock, fevered with lichen, a rubella of polka and blotch. Manja's touch is light. The stone is cold, hard with reverence, carmine in its overflow.

She sits. She can think of nothing but water. Water, all the more so now that gold and red have returned. She must have water. Where may it

be hidden? Beside her stands a protea, its foliage green, delicately outlined in red. She breaks a leaf like glass and chews it. A deep, pure bitterness spreads in her mouth and calls forth at once a gush of foam. She spits. Spits again with all her might. So much rising damp and slobber! Ah, she feels this bitterness.

What is she then, inhuman being? A water filled with rocks, a breathing substance burning itself - more than mere chemistry and physics is man. 'I am an alchemy,' thinks Manja, 'a drop of purest gold.' Her heart knocks, her breath takes her: L! God's L - Lucifer - is what I banished years ago. It is returned. In the east I missed it by a single note, have hummed my OM over the centuries. Adopted this tune in the west (my recent self) with my mouth and eyes stubbornly closed shut, full of consideration and reason, lost in thought. Ammm no more. Open. A simple lilt, a lifting of the tongue is what creates the spark, a blissful song. Manja rises, walks again, speaking to herself, intoning:

An alchemy
is man. A drop
of purest gold.

God's L - Lucifer -
is returned from his winding travels
in banished rock on earth,
and I am that L.

The tongue must loop to sing,
luciferous, to see I must return
to C, an affirmation rich with Can -
Luc!
I am the match, so strike me.

Yes, it is good.
Let luck be gathered
to come to me. This is my latest dawning,
drawn from the bitterest refreshment.

Again and again she sings her dithyramb, flying over the rocky ground whose path inclines gradually upwards. It is a holiday. How long does she walk? The sun seems high when the docks can no longer be seen, but her watch shows the time to be only seven forty. Her watch. Manja laughs out loud. Her watch! Seven forty! It seems to be a most amusing feature of the world: to count this minute, this hour and to name the mark thus made. Manja grins and winks at the sun, but alas: she shall not escape her smallness.

The registration of the time - this all-too-human time - immediately calls her bodily memories to attention. With a serpentine wrench, her stomach demands breakfast, even though Manja knows that if she were to eat anything now, it would only intensify the pain. She must stop to breathe the spasm out, then she forces herself on, keeping to her contour and ignoring turn-offs both to the left and right. At length, the gravel track stops at a fork with a stile, which she scales, following a path that promises to lead her up. She has a yen, now, to get higher, despite the acid which is beginning to burn in her thighs and back, despite her aching head and the gluey ash in her throat. In another world, perhaps, these might be sensations of suffering. In her world, in the contour of this moment, they are companions of her spirit.

Yet the high trees she walks beneath now, weaken her. Rough and towering they provide a shade whose fragrance is lonely and dry. She leans her head against a trunk's cool bark, typically wrung with diagonal siennas and greys. She destroys a leaf and breathes its healing vapour deeply in. She sleeps, so it seems, for the briefest of flickers. When she wakes, it is in a strange purplish world that she has never seen before.

Eyes half-closed, she rambles her ditty: "An alchemy is man, a drop." Almost sleepwalking onward she reaches at last again the part: "a water filled with rocks." She sinks onto her knees, cups her hands and, her nose pressed against prickly moss and soil, drinks without gratitude from the narrow brook in the ravine.

Half an hour or so she remains there, like a vegetable letting water seep up to her head till she is tight with it. In this interim an elderly man, no bigger than a child, striding along with a walking

stick and two small, stiff dogs interrupts her solitude. He nods and cries, "Up early then?" as he passes her by on legs whose pale skin is taut between ligament and bone. Manja marvels like an invalid who has suddenly been healed, to whom the smallest thing appears miraculous. The hiker turns around, no doubt struck by the gleam in her eye; meeting her gaze, he lifts a hand before continuing.

A short while later a couple of tourists stop by and offer her a rusk. Manja scratches at it with her teeth. How sweet, how nourishing it is! She fondles the biscuit between her hands, gazes at it lovingly; she cannot take her eyes off it. It is so beautiful, soft, porous, crumbling, fairest of all yellows.

The tourists want to know whether she lives here. Manja giggles.

"You mean, here?" she asks, indicating her sitting-place and adding, "Yes. I live here. Here and there." With her mouth full she turns her head from left to right.

The tourists - a young woman and man - smile cautiously. She can see them reiterating their parents' and the travel agent's warnings. They look around, although Manja has already informed them that she is alone. Is she just a decoy? In the next moment they may, after all, find themselves surrounded by a tribe of knife-wielding characters hungry for the fat in their leather pouches. She can see the girl surreptitiously, instinctively trying to push on her boyfriend who, however, is still assessing what presents.

"If you are lucky you may see a snake," says Manja, "there are many in the mountains here in summer, though they are very shy. They generally only attack if you provoke them. You know, corner them," she goes on cruelly.

"Yes, of course," agrees the boy in good, learned English, "do you think there is a chance that we might see one?"

He shushes the girl who is trying terribly gently to get his attention.

Manja takes another bite of rusk. "No," she says, "unfortunately it's highly unlikely. Probably you will only see one if you want to."

There is a flicker of doubt in both pairs of blue eyes opposite Manja; followed by earnest curiosity on the boy's face, bewilderment on the girl's.

"I don't think you want to," continues Manja, looking at the pretty, sunburned girl.

"No!" admits the latter, glad to be acknowledged at last. She sounds surprisingly confident.

"I am sure you will not," says Manja soothingly. "Go on without fear. You will see only what you want to see, believe me. You may even have passed one by already, without knowing. Snakes have a feeling. Their bones hear you long before you arrive, which gives them plenty of time to retreat. Thank you for the rusk. It was a bit too sweet, but it has done me a lot of good."

Much relieved, the couple heads off west, away from the heat without daring to look round. Gentlefolk, reared in nurseries to die there amid informative videotapes of wildlife and eloquent narrations of world cultures. Let it be, so long as they continue to bring her bread.

Feeling strengthened, Manja resumes her journey. She must go on, return to ordinary life. To Eric? To the reality of the load hanging from her shoulder? She crosses a second streambed, almost completely dry. To her left lies the city, veiled by its unrefreshing respirations - flat, seen from this height. Hour after hour goes by; Manja plods on ox-like. It is past noon when she arrives at a sign inscribed with the words 'Skeleton Gorge'. She peers up into the mossiness that is still fairly moist even in this season. The upward haven the sign demarcates is as seductive as it is deceptive. She has been this way before long ago, she knows, though she cannot remember the experience (was it that?) at all. No, when she came here she was still fresh, plump, intact. The sun looks over the shoulder now of this endless mountain and over Manja's own shoulder, too, drawing the shadows ever further away from the bodies from which they are cast. Her tread loses life, becomes mechanical. Trudging joylessly, she watches the shadow's outline disappear eventually into the mountainside whose afternoon is always dark, and Manja enters Cecilia plantation. From there, mindless plod into the saddle of the berg finally to end up, in the summer dusk, at Morning Glory, Eric's hidden abode.

Except, she resists temptation - convinced that the load in her sling bag is rebelling, like love - and hitches instead to Plumstead Station. A train takes her to Fish Hoek. By the time she knocks on Giles Moore's door, it is after nine. To Manja's surprise, a disgruntled-looking woman in her sixties opens. She does not undo the chain. It turns out that Giles has moved into an old age home. Manja is distraught.

"He fell down the stairs," says the woman crossly, as if Giles had caused her to lose her footing, "and then he couldn't walk up anymore." She shuts the door firmly in Manja's face.

What else is there to do? Manja presents herself at the home - the words 'Carlisle Lodge' are written in large black letters across the façade - as an 'old family friend'. She finds Giles in bed, smoking and watching rugby on television. He is utterly taken aback by her appearance and is helplessly seized by a coughing fit. He sits up with difficulty, holding onto the edge of the mattress with both hands, and gasps with streaming eyes, his face bent over his lap.

There are no signs of individuality in his room. Apart from the bed and bedside table, there is a cheap wardrobe, commode, red plastic kitchen chair and small table upon which, mercifully, is the single indicator that Giles' soul has not completely disappeared - a copy of *Beloved*. Giles has put on weight and sports a veritable paunch beneath an uncharacteristically decent-looking jersey. He now wipes the spittle from his lips, and more or less clean-shaven chin, with his sleeve, grabs hold of the bedside table, pushing himself up to a standing position. Then he reaches out, leans his body over into nothing and, in a manner of speaking, falls onto the table surface at the window where Manja is standing, landing on strong hands and arms. His feet come painfully after. He is now close enough to Manja to stretch his neck out, point his lips and aim at hers.

It must surely be her destiny to brace herself, little by little, by means of small words and gestures, day after day, against conventional judgments of surface designs. There is no doubt in her mind that she is, at this moment, not Manja Yvonne Levsky, but a momentary embodiment of all of Giles' secret hopes, perhaps the dashed hopes of old men in general. There is no question that she must rise to the occasion and play her part. As the man, so much taller than she, nears her face, she is certain that she ought to feel disgust and, indeed, she would be lying if she claimed that his oily smell had ceased to repel her. But elsewhere - behind, beside, underneath - who knows where? - the smell is an impulse so innocent and trusting that it enthrals her momentarily and she thrusts her lips forward generously.

It is meant to be a friendly kiss, yet it has something sacrificial about it, since it is wet, cold and entirely unenjoyable. Giles, totally starved of physical affection, as he no doubt is, is clearly

convinced that he offered her no choice. There is, briefly, an air of predatory satisfaction about him; mixed with gentle surprise of which Manja is sure only she is aware.

When Giles suggests they go for a drink, Manja, whose eyesight has diminished temporarily both from weariness and hunger, does not refuse the offer.

Giles engineers his way to the door and takes two crutches standing beside it. He drags himself out by them, through the long, empty, stair-free corridor of the lodge. His determination - or is it simply his momentary good mood? - seems to throw Manja back upon herself. For no reason at all, there is a lump in her chest, dangerously close to the surface. She presses against it by holding her bag in both arms to her breast. She can feel that it will not work for long.

Giles manages, somehow, to plunge bottom-first into the driver's seat without requiring assistance. As usual, there is much noise and certainly no hurry as her unlikely friend lifts his legs one by one into the car. Manja moves her knees obediently away when Giles tucks his crutches loosely in between her seat and the handbrake. She has not known that it is possible to be so reliant upon the aid of gravity. He tells her that he will forgo the benefit of a pensioner's discount at the 'Spur', and drives them - in a manner equally painful as his gait - to the 'Brass Bell' in the harbour village of Kalk Bay. Giles is pleased to hear that Manja has not been there. They pass a backpacker's lodge at the edge of the village, which is where Manja will hopefully be able to stay the night. She holds her satchel-full of papers tighter.

Each gesture that Giles makes is of a dangerously slovenly quality and Manja quickly realises that other motorists treat him instinctively as a hazard, keeping safely out of his way. His stiffness prevents him from parking properly and when they leave the car, its rear fender juts into the street opposite chains of merrily coloured bulbs hung between the street lamps. Manja does not dare to offer to re-park it for him. He leaves the windows open "as always," since this is a sign that "the car is not worth stealing."

The restaurant turns out to be on the other side of the railway line. Giles could not have chosen a worse destination, given his physical state. They shamble down the stairs, and through the subway which the council workers have already flushed with detergent. A thin, longhaired

man with a guitar is rasping, "Hey, that's her, and she's mine", in the half-light of the tunnel. He nods sweetly as they pass.

When they finally enter the cosy, dimly lit restaurant, Manja tells herself: 'I am here on Theo's account'. But would Theo ever have found himself in a public eating place; moreover, in the company of somebody like Giles? Manja stares at his puffy face - disturbingly white on account of the effort which the walk has cost him - disliking her helplessness. The truth is, she would like to save him. Why, she does not know. Of course it is impossible. But perhaps she is a victim of pity.

Giles is uncompromisingly morose about the old age home. He detests the other 'cronies', especially the 'stupid women' who share his table morning, noon and night. There is nothing to do but eat and watch television. At least he has a television set now, though. And he can bath, for there are rails.

"But you read, don't you?" ventures Manja.

"It is difficult," he replies, still huffing painfully, "I am dyslexic and read only very slowly."

"I could come and read to you."

"You wouldn't want to do that."

"I enjoy reading out loud. It would be a pleasure for me."

Not for him, though, she can see. She would be invading his privacy.

"That godforsaken place is my last stop," he says, "then I'm out of here."

Is it the beer that has changed his mood? His eyes are distracted by the rugby game on the television set in the opposite corner above them. Clearly, he is too exhausted to do anything else.

Manja picks at the last pieces of her snow-white hake. A profound tiredness overcomes her. If she was hoping for words of wisdom from this quarter, or possibly even to share her mystical experience of the previous night, then she must be disappointed.

As she gulps down the last of her Black Label, she realises that she has lost this round. She is not Theo; she is not like Theo. She is not really a part of the ocean. She cannot really stand straight by herself on bare feet in the grime of the real street. She can trumpet out loud - to herself, at least, and to those near to her, whoever they may be - feelings, values, beliefs, and assertions - but consistently to act thereon is a different matter. Certainly the past twenty-four hours (or

should that be the past several years? or, indeed, her life?) have provided her with - let her call it 'useful inside information'. But what is she to do with it? Is she even capable of progress? She stares at Giles staring at the television. The lump in her chest, which had disappeared during the meal, stirs again. It is as if the imaginary drop of gold from her ecstatic consciousness this morning had achieved physical proportions and she had swallowed it. Does she really wish to go to a backpacker's lodge in this state?

"Would you give me a lift to - a friend?" she says.

Giles ignores her question. He is totally absorbed by the game flickering against the ceiling. Has he fallen asleep with his eyes open? Manja bends to pick up her bag and puts it on the table before her. As she does so, there is a prickling sensation in her arms lying upon the satchel. Is it an allergic reaction to the fynbos pollens she has yet to wash off? But she does not scratch. She gazes at the television screen without watching it. It is a point of focus only, like a candle, for her concentration is solely upon what is happening between her bare arms and the leather with its latches. It is a glueing process, akin to a kind of paralysis. Perhaps it is due to her tiredness, but it is undeniably both fascinating and desirable. Within seconds she knows she - or, rather, her body - is conversing directly with Theo. She remains taut, absolutely motionless. She is, naturally, dreaming, but in her dream she feels lucid, as if she were waking at last from a long, deep sleep. She can neither see nor touch Theo, but his body appears to be turning over beneath the weight of her arms, in the confines of the satchel, like Tutankhamun stirring from his bands. The noise in the restaurant echoes the sounds of breakers; the smoking, drinking men and women sway like entangled weeds in this mysterious ocean on the shore where Theo - lives.

This is the crack in her cocoon. The time has come. She is hatched into a new existence, expanded in her soul. Manja feels it like a flowering in both brain hemispheres. She is no longer barred. She is everything and everyone, molten into the moment. How marvellous it is and how unseen. May nothing pierce the truth of this dream. She can fly now where she will, but she must act now, and quickly!

The rugby game is over. Giles looks at Manja with strangely vivid eyes. Is it a smile that comes between them? He rises, grunting, extracts money loosely from his pockets, caught in his handkerchief. Coins fall

out of his hand, which it seems he is unable to cup, and to the floor where Manja retrieves them. She waits for him to pocket them; to take his crutches leaning against the back of the till on the counter.

"Thank you," she says when they exit.

"It's my pleasure," he replies.

Eventually in the car, on the way to Eric's cottage, he tells her that he suffered from insomnia for most of his adult life.

"That's where my papier-mâché things came from," he says, "I used to make them at night."

"You must miss it," says Manja.

"Not really, no. There's no space now," he sighs, adding, "They give me pills at the home."

Manja holds up her bag.

"My friend's brother left all these pictures," she explains, "the one who died. Do you know, I'm going to illustrate them with words."

"Well, I wish you luck," says Giles.

He drops her at the side of the road, prising another kiss, and rolls off in his inimitable way. As if his hands upon the steering wheel were only nominally there, like a rider who, forgoing a bridle, allows his horse to find the way home.

Manja stands, again, at the edge of this artificial wood. The summer night is cold. She tiptoes past the gardener's abode where he resides, seemingly beyond the cares of the world, in peace. Unfortunately however, she sees no way of passing through the electronic gate without ringing the bell. How late is it? She is unable to make out the time on her watch by the pallid light of the lanterns that surround the property. She does not wish to wake the maid, whom she hardly knows and whose name she is unable to remember. Moreover, the owners may be home. Waking them is unthinkable.

She feels her way around the high metal bars of the fence. They utter subtle, ash-grey notes at her touch. The ground quickly gives way to wildness, falling off dangerously beneath her feet. She holds on and continues like a monkey in - or should that be outside? - a cage. Faraway, raised beyond shrubs in the garden, she can make out the main house; then, as the slope runs out there comes Eric's cottage, all dark. Manja sobs briefly, overcome with longing to be held in his arms, to be delivered of this cold and quailing. Like a prisoner she holds the icy bars.

"Eric," she calls softly, "Eric!"

She tries again, but shout too loudly she dare not. She sits down in the rustling vegetation and leans against one of the tall steel masts. Rough twigs and spiky leaves penetrate through from below. She shifts her satchel underneath her. A few frogs' intermittent drop-drop sounds are audible; some crickets are chirping in the trees. A breeze rushes through the leaves overhead. What is she to do?

At length, she rises and re-traces her steps. In the fork of the driveway she stops, sensing the presence of the gardener asleep. What hinders her from asking for help? Does she not require it? She may seek the prize of an invisible world, but that does not excuse her from making her way through the visible.

She turns and walks slowly towards Maxwell's door. Knocks firmly, several times. He appears bare-chested at the little window and starts in surprise. After a few seconds he emerges barefoot in a pair of shorts and t-shirt.

"I'm sorry to wake you, Maxwell," says Manja, "I've locked myself out. Do you have a buzzer to open that gate?"

It turns out that he has not.

"Maar ons kan daar opgaan," he says and points.

It is infinitely soothing not to have him question her intention to invade the property keyless.

Manja follows him in the darkness round the other side, till the fence gives way to a stone wall, possibly somewhat lower than the fence.

There seems to be a gate, for Maxwell rattles something, then he grumbles and says,

"Nee, dis toe. Toegesluit."

Then he squats and instructs Manja to climb onto his shoulders. She removes her sandals and obeys, although it feels odd. However, Maxwell's demeanour is so detached that it seems more as if she is surrendering, rather than asserting, her own will. He throws her bag up for her, then leaps and catches the top of the wall with his fingers. Finding a footing he makes his way up. He sits for a minute to catch his breath. He seems utterly self-contained. Perhaps that is what happens to a person when they look after silverleaf trees, fennels, agapanthuses and roses without being much disturbed. She wishes she had more time to study his long, slightly uneven face whose true character is revealed the more for being half-hidden by shadow. He turns briefly towards her, as if annoyed by her eyes' lingering touch, her invasiveness, and she quickly averts her gaze, shot through with shame. When she turns round to descend backwards, however, he restrains her. Sliding down on his stomach as far as possible, Maxwell jumps, landing on all fours. She does the same, but as she lets go, he softens the fall for her by supporting her at the waist. She slips down against him to the ground and he retreats. Manja tucks Theo's papers, half-fallen out, back into her bag. She turns submissively towards the gardener, but he points his arm towards the cottage, as he has done before. Does he know better, then, than she, where her place is? She starts down the terraces. By the time she looks around, Maxwell has disappeared over the wall.

The door to Eric's cottage is not locked. Manja stands irresolutely in the doorway, where Mau soon comes to greet her. She has never lifted the cat, but now she picks her up and buries her face in the fine, warm hair, breathing Mau in up to her skin. It smells just like Pro-Vita biscuits. The cat emits a small, surprised gurgle at being pressed so

hard, and trots out into the garden, perhaps relieved when Manja puts her down again.

Manja slips through the curtain that separates the sleeping area and contemplates Eric's deep, rhythmic breathing. She sheds her clothes and sidles in carefully alongside him beneath the warm cotton covers. What with her body at last in a horizontal position, extreme exhaustion gains an instant hold. Gravity sucks her deep into oblivion as her lungs move to and fro of their own accord, perfectly in tune, as she believes, with his.

When Eric wakes with the dawn, it takes him several minutes to acknowledge that the soft purr beside him emanates from a woman. He gazes at her bare shoulder as she lies, her back to him. He fears that she might emerge. It would mean that he, too, must emerge - into conversation, explanation, interaction. Rather not. Tiptoeing about, he keeps his morning routine to a minimum, forgoing even breakfast before driving to his office in Salt River, where he frets the entire day that she might disappear again or, indeed, that she might stay. Neither possibility seems to be an acceptable option. Tired and overexcited simultaneously, he averts the traffic by returning home by four o'clock.

He finds Manja lying on her stomach on a towel spread over the grass. She is wearing his purple lizard-shirt and shorts and is paging through his *Images from the I Ching*. As if frightened by his approach, she lets it snap shut and jumps onto her knees. His heart, though still beating nervously, sinks, yet he sits down next to her. After a while he takes her hand, feeling the usual edge of resistance in it.

"I looked at that book yesterday. I've been trying to make sense of things," he says.

Silence.

Then Manja withdraws her hand and says,

"I'm sorry I just barged in on you."

Before Eric can reply, she continues,

"I'm sorry I ran off. I'm sorry to have been so confrontative. I'm sorry I haven't appreciated you more."

"That's a lot of sorries," replies Eric.

"Yes," she agrees, looking down.

There is another pause.

"I confess," says Eric, gesturing at the book, "that I consulted the I Ching oracle in relation to you." He examines Manja's knitted brow. "Okay, us. It said Kou - 'Coming to Meet'. It told me, 'The maiden is powerful. One should not marry such a maiden.' It said the situation would not change in the foreseeable future."

He tries to smile at Manja. She cannot hide a return-grin. Quite possibly he has been a fool, rigid and old-fashioned when there is no need to be. He takes the picture book and opens it on the relevant page. 'Temptation', it reads. The print on the facing page shows a labyrinth of clouds, with a feminine figure at the core. Manja bends over the book and reads out loud:

"Amazed, I meet myself coming from the centre."

She looks at Eric, her eyes darker than ever. Her features appear to be relaxed, he takes note of the familiar bump on her nose, her lips whose creases are not deep and vertical, but shallowly whorled. He almost kisses her, but catches himself in time.

Eric stares at Manja. She is aware of the generous hoods over his eyes, becomes suddenly engulfed by his herby body odour. Yet she keeps her body taut, remains erect in the spine, and the moment passes.

"It said the maiden is not pure," Eric goes on, "she has associated with other men. Perhaps she is still associated?" he ventures.

Manja is absorbed in the warm bronze of his iris. She imagines joining it to Theo's polar blue by means of colour on paper. Brown and blue has always been a favourite combination of hers. Marriage of earth and heaven. Meld orange ground with water to give clay. Then she realises that he is waiting for an answer.

"Yes," she says. That is surely the correct reply.

"Not that it matters."

"No."

There is a new humility about Eric; perhaps it has always been there. Perhaps she has been too defensive to notice it. Perhaps she has yet to get to know this brother who, quite possibly, is the softer of the two.

"Have you eaten?" he asks.

"I've not been hungry."

"You've become very thin."

They move into the cottage as the automatic sprinkler system, ignoring the water restrictions, begins its late afternoon programme.

"The owners must do something about this wasteful behaviour," observes Manja, adding, "I retrieved my rain director from the compost. I'm afraid we still need it. How do you imagine we shall ever get over the water shortage?"

"Do you intend hanging it here again?" replies Eric. "Are you intending to live here again? What place do you envisage for me in your plans? Which, I might add, remain mysterious to me."

He has sat down and is looking up at her. She steps towards the bookshelf and, by re-bending some of the wires, manages to secure the saxophone on its built-in lever. How long will it remain so? Watching it, she says,

"I don't know if it is possible to change the ground of a relationship, once that relationship is under way. I depend on you in all manner of ways," she continues. "Maybe I even like depending."

"Do you want to be here?" interjects Eric. "Is that so difficult a question to answer?"

"I do not want to be a wife," replies Manja, "in any way, to anybody. Having said that - yes, I would like to be here. I would like your help at this precise moment in time. I'm turning to you now. As I have done before."

Eric rubs his knuckles, which he has interlocked upon his knees, with his nose.

"I didn't like it when you left," he says, "it threw me. So I support you. For a while, I take it." She nods, and he adds, "How do I know when you will disappear again?"

Manja sits down beside Eric. She puts her head against his shoulder. Her weight pushes him over and they fall. He seems bewildered. They re-assemble themselves. She kneels opposite him and says,

"I don't believe I need to fly anymore. I can just go step by step with my human feet."

She stretches her legs, peruses her bare feet and wiggles her toes.

Eric chuckles despite himself.

"Extremely mobile feet you have there. Should I not ask where they intend going next? Maybe I should count my blessings as you suggest," he adds.

She looks at him to check that he is not being sarcastic.

"Our friendship," she says, "is important to me. I won't desert that."

Eric produces a snarl. "Friendship," he says. "What do you mean by that? It has a peculiarly unconvincing ring to it."

"Does it now?" she answers, seizes him by the shoulders and pushes him down to the ground. He looks surprised and rather expectant. "Well, then," she continues, "let me show you without further ado that a maiden must find ways of seeing to fairly specific requirements in her body as well as her soul. In the absence of a husband, she may be glad to have the services of a trusted friend. Provided voluntarily, of course."

She straddles him. His back arches unsuitably over the beanbag he has been sitting on. He flinches, and Manja's courage wilts immediately. She has again forgotten her physical presence which will, alas, never be anything but clumsy. Is it within her reach to gain the skills of an ideal woman?

Eric shifts uncomfortably, although his eyes are shining. She places her hands on his chest and gazes at him disconsolately.

"I am a windbag," she says, adding, "but at least I'm real."

She returns to his side, while he pushes the beanbag up beneath their heads, and they lie down on the African rug to face one another.

He cooks lentil lasagna and the fragrance of garam masala permeates the space. He fetches her things while she settles at the desk 'to gather herself'. She is aware of gratitude towards him simply for being alive and present.

What now? Most important, she thinks, is not to forget where one comes from. Though where is that? That is the question that leaves her hovering between oceans and galaxies, so to speak. Knowledge. Delicate spirals of intelligence, perhaps translated for moments in time into words, pictures, number relations, three-dimensional structures - all the efforts in the human world by means of which people seem to reach both forward and back towards their origins and destinations simultaneously. Towards something aesthetic - something true (distinct from ideal) - and perceptible: something that may be smelt, seen, tasted, heard, or touched - and be moving. Her pen moves.

Not having wanted to inhabit this cottage, here she is now. Not having wanted to become entangled with Eric, she has now consciously declared a commitment to him. It is not a commitment of a conventional sort, but

perhaps it is the more serious for that. It is her own word, after all, sworn by herself. She is her own witness, besides Eric.

And what of the interregnal moments she has experienced? The thresholds between here and there? They are not 'drug trips'. Nor need they be possessive, forcing her to choose between themselves and this. They are, indeed, a part of this.

'The maiden is not pure', Eric had said. Does he know the purity of this silence, this complete state of aloneness? Only the clock ticks on the wall.

She peers at her satchel. It eyes her meaningfully. Does it smile? She removes its contents and leafs through till she has found the sketch of the crow beside the woman. She stares at its large beak and inky tears. The woman's uncoloured, wavering thighs seem milky, almost fluid; between them is a small black sea, in which the medium was permitted freely to outline and to arrange itself, and it has done so - perfectly according to its nature.

She rustles the pages and retrieves those of Irene. Sees the old woman's hand like wind over the paper of her face. Manja bites her lip and, in the wetness thus created, she remembers Giles. She wipes her mouth dry till it burns. Sniffs.

Then she gets up and stands in the frame of the open doorway, listening into the night.

TEXTUAL ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The rhyme by Ruth Krauss on p.iv may be located in:

WESTERMANN'S Kinderbuch (1951) ed. Käthe Boekhoff and Elisabeth Ekström, Braunschweig: Georg Westermann Verlag p.195

For the convenience of English-speaking readers, I have translated the poem as follows:

“Who puts a shell against their ear,
cries in delight: the sea I hear!
I ask you, no,
what you receive is not the sea,
it is your blood in rushing swell
Mark it well!”

Philip Larkin's poem, 'This Be The Verse', referred to in **Part 1**, Chapter 11, p.54, may be located in:

LARKIN, PHILIP (1988) *Collected Poems* ed. Anthony Thwaite, London: Faber and Faber, p.180

The words "in a corner, some untidy spot" in **Part 1**, Chapter 12, p.58, are appropriated from W.H. Auden's poem 'Musée des Beaux Arts', to be found in:

AUDEN, W.H. (1979) *Selected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson, London: Faber and Faber, p.79

The words "in the southern extremes of Africa there [are people] so intelligent and peaceful that their only pastime [is] to sit and think" in **Part 2**, Chapter 17, p.83, are from Gabriel García Marquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, quoted in:

HEAD, BESSIE (1984) *A Bewitched Crossroad*, Craighall: Ad Donker, p.8

The quotations from Willem Strydom's article in **Part 2**, Chapter 20, pp.102-103, are from:

MUNNIK, VICTOR (1995) 'Turning the Tide', *Sunday Life Magazine*, 12 November, pp.12-17

The chapter on Gabriel Wasserfall, **Part 2**, Chapter 21, partially relies on dialogue and information derived from an interview conducted with Johnny Daniels by myself. The interview is lodged in the Western Cape Oral History Project Archive at UCT, and took place in Ocean View on 10 July 1995.

The chapter on Wanda van Vuuren and Lewanna Minnaar, **Part 2**, Chapter 22, partially relies on dialogue and information derived from two interviews, which I conducted with Dorothy Layters and Sarah Klein. The interviews are lodged in the UCT archives and were held at Red Hill Farm, Simonstown, on 23 and 29 May 1995.

The chapter on the graveyard at Baskloof, **Part 3**, Chapter 28, partially relies on dialogue and information from an interview I conducted with Millicent Page at Wildschutsbrand Farm, Red Hill, Simonstown, on 23 May 1995. The interview is lodged in the UCT archives. The chapter also leans on informal testimony provided by Emily Klein at Red Hill and Wildschutsbrand Farms on 4 February 1997.

The biblical quotations in **Part 3**, Chapter 30, pp.166, may be located in the King James Version, 1 Corinthians, 13.

The words "Great-rooted blossomer" in **Part 3**, Chapter 30, p.166, are appropriated from W.B. Yeats' 'Among School Children', to be found in: YEATS, W.B. (1984) *Collected Poems*, London: Macmillan, p.245

Eric's interpretation of the I Ching hexagram Kou, referred to in **Part 3**, Chapter 37, p.198, relies on:

I CHING or Book of Changes (1967) The Richard Wilhelm Translation rendered into English by Cary F. Barnes, London: Arkana (1989), pp.608-610

The description of the image 'Temptation', and its accompanying text, referred to in **Part 3**, Chapter 37, p.198, derive from:

IMAGES from the I Ching. Visual Meditations on The Book of Change (1987) Paintings by Ann Williams Introduction by Ralph Metzner, Dorset: Prism Press, pp.110-111