ANOTHER MAN'S DICK

A SATIRE BY
SEAN CHRISTIE

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Arts in Creative Writing

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Introduction

The billboard that nearly caused John Woods to swerve off the coastal road stood much higher than existing legislation permitted. He knew this because he had recently taken a position as a community reporter on a local rag, and he was starting to get a hang of municipal legalese, whether he liked it or not.

A hundred yards on he contemplated its mysterious message, identically phrased in the reverse view, and set against the same blue background that had Woods thinking, for a subliminal moment, that the Billboard was part of the ocean beyond, the white letters nothing more than gently ruffled caps of water.

The Wait is Almost Over.

He looked around at the green mountainside and the gently waving forest of kelp, which flanked the ocean road. Not an impatient scene, exactly. Not a single soul waiting for a god-damned thing. He read the slogan again, and as its meaning dawned (an understanding that it must mean some development was imminent: that *almost over* portended the very worst for a perfectly beautiful section of mountainside, untouched for all time) he became aware of an increasing tightness in his chest, as if he were taking on pressurised air.

He felt the desire to shout something back at the slogan, something equally presumptuous, equally menacing.

He picked up a rock, a nice blade of Cape sandstone, and hurled it. (The missile struck with a clang, and dropped to the ground.)

Next he tried to pull the billboard over, but since it was not a supple birch, the thing would not begin to lean, no matter how high he climbed.

When Inspector Claude Grey rounded the corner on a routine patrol he intercepted Woods at that point of his destructive endeavours where he had attached a tow-line to the structure's left leg, and was proceeding to push the engine of his car through higher and higher revolutions as white sand spurted out from beneath his balding tyres.

On the charge sheet the following information was recorded:

Name: Jonathan Woods

Occupation: Community Reporter, Environmental Affairs.

Offence: Destruction of property

Mason Construction PTY (Ltd), to whom the billboard belonged, went ahead with the prosecution. It was not to be the last charge laid against the reporter (then a young man) by that company. The story that follows is, in a sense, an account of this long and bitter feud.

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John Woods scratched amongst the bristles of his beard at the acne scarring beneath. The draft report in front of him was of some interest, if somewhat typical. (Bizarre, revolting, but typical). He called out the provisional headline, testing its sensationalism: 'Fat balls on the beaches!'

N'taks Khosa, his junior reporter, appeared in the office doorway

'Yes, they've been washing up on the beaches for weeks,' she explained; 'spherical lumps of lard the size of cricket balls. Yesterday a golden retriever had to receive an emergency tracheotomy, after a fat ball became lodged in its throat.'

'The Department of Tourism will be over the moon,' Woods gloated. 'It's a sure sign the industry is growing. How do they occur, these fat balls?'

'It's in the report. I suggest they're the fault of restaurants, hotels and B&B's, who wash oil and fat into the sewerage system.'

'Hm, yes, they should have grease traps for that. The waste water by-law requires this. It's a little unit that sifts the bad stuff from the good. That's undoubtedly where the trouble lies. Cleaning a grease trap is like pulling an Egyptian Goose from the engine of an Airbus. I should know, I run a bed and breakfast for my sins. Half the units along the seaboard have not been touched in years, I bet. The filters clog, the fat gets into the sewerage and rolls itself into balls, and then the outflow pipes play boule on the ocean floor, a kilometre and a half out from the beaches.'

Bravura moments of this sort were a daily occurrence in the office. N'taks admired her editor greatly for his breadth of microcosmic knowledge, his prosaic city insights. But it was in the way that one might admire, say, a master beekeeper, or calligraphist. She certainly did not regard Woods as a mentor, and in fact suspected the peculiar intensity of his preoccupations. This post was temporary, to say the least. Vocationally, and perhaps even racially, she was well and truly insulated from his influence, despite whatever other designs Woods might have for her.

'But community papers like ours are the treatment,' he was saying. 'The key is the dog, of course. Affluent Capetonians love dogs. What's more, it was a golden retriever. Fuck with a thoroughbred like that, and you might as well tar and feather one of Nelson Mandela's grand children, for all the sympathy it will get you.'

'That's wrong.'

'Disturbing, yes indeed. But quite true. And it's the right of the community paper to play to this sinister phenomenon. As a reporter for The Atlantic Sun, you are not obliged to contextualize your stories, the way journalists (attempt to) do on the bigger papers. You are encouraged to privilege the arbitrary and the trivial details of community life, so long as they have somebody up in arms.'

N'taks shook her head. 'If my career stalls and I have to stay on this rag, I'm going to swim out to sea with a bag of fish entrails around my neck.'

'It would be no use. Table Bay is a liquid desert. Ten years of chlorine doses in the sewerage and even microbial bacteria is going around cap in hand.'

Editor and journalist stared suspiciously out from the window. The office, once a small travel agency, was on the 6th floor of a Sea Point building, two streets back from the ocean. On the gravel-strewn roofs of the buildings in front and below, baby gulls had hatched and were rolling around like dirty grey tennis balls. Some of the balls weren't rolling at all, and occasionally an adult would stride over and aim a few pecks there, then stride off again with down clinging to its yellow beak. Woods had chosen the premises a year before.

'You love it, don't you?' N'taks said, transfixed by the cannibalistic scene. 'You love tearing up the picture of a postcard-perfect Cape Town. You want to save people from their dreams.'

'Interestingly put.'

'Why?'

John was not about to answer *that* question. He would only be hazarding a guess at any rate. Introspection was something he had given up as a bad idea. Introspecting, after twenty years as a community journalist, starting out as a junior reporter, like N'taks, and rising only two tiers to the position of Editor, tended to carry the symbol of a skull and cross bones. As a means of survival John preferred the method of deflection. As a community newsman one could endlessly deflect life's great questions. No story—not the church book sale, or the new by-law aimed at keeping skate-boards off the promenade—was too small. Some people found their *raison d'etre* in the quest. John Woods had found his in the banalities of the seaboard suburbs.

'Your piece needs a smaller target, I feel. An interview with a prominent restaurateur, perhaps, someone who is bound to be in the wrong? Might I suggest Oliver Mason, the owner of *Wiseman's*? That's a grease kitchen right on the sands of Blue Bay's premier beach. He's been allowed, somehow, to contravene a dozen municipal laws at least: zoning, building, alcohol sales...

No doubt because his father, Bill Mason, basically founded the town. They're a small town oligarchy, those Mason's.'

'I like the irony?'

'What irony?'

'In the name: *Wiseman's* on the beach. You know the biblical story about the two men who—'

'Yes, yes,' Woods said, somewhat dismissively. He liked to think of himself as the area's first ironist (he could be confident of that achievement, at least) yet he had somehow missed the reference to a biblical parable popular with Sunday schools. That an institution run by a Mason—a unit of that family Woods regarded as being irretrievably cast-off from any recognisable history or culture—had put one over his head, was a matter of deep irritation. Luckily, the means to petty revenge was always at hand. He would have N'taks go down there and interview the jolly restaurateur, while he watched. It would do him a world of good to have the Mason's know that he was training up a new generation of nit-pickers—black nit-pickers, moreover (Woods was well aware of how, as an ageing white male a decade after the transformation, he was thought of as little more than a disgruntled pedant, his views accordingly dismissed.) The only thing standing in the way of this satisfaction was the fact that his car, a green Uno Fiat, happened to be at the panel beaters. A hedge - und manager in a brand new silver Landrover had reversed into the driver's-side door a month before. Although he had not been in the car at the time, she was somehow contesting his claim, on the basis that 'nobody ever parks *there*'. Then there had been the sub-standard work—Woods had had to send the vehicle back twice already.

'We'll have to take your vehicle,' he said brusquely. 'Mine's—'

And for the next twenty minutes, as they followed the coastal road out of Bantry Bay, N'taks heard the parable of the Green Fiat, according to John Woods.

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The narrowness of the coastal road was such that it often obliged one to park at some distance from one's target.

'We're lucky it's overcast,' said Woods, meaning the beaches would be empty. He led the way, and as they walked he pointed out certain things, like naturalists are wont to do, only one who specialises in what might be termed

an urban ecology. 'The signs of our property boom,' Woods called them, like the crazy line of paint down the centre of the road, which had nothing to do with the official markings ('...paint dribbling out of builders' rubble, between the truck's tailgate and its bed'), or the stop sign that had been bent down to the ground, like a straw ('an articulated brick-truck, turning too wide').

On the coastal side of the road the mountainside dropped a further hundred feet to the beach. Beside the path that led down, a small parking lot had been extended out into open air, like a jetty. There were three bays, two of which were occupied by sports cars plated Mason 2 and Mason 3. An upright metal rod, locked in place at its hinge, guarded the third.

'What did I tell you,' said Woods, 'They're latter-day oligarchs, these Mason's. There's three sons: Vernon, Richard, and Oliver, all from different mothers. Vernon and Richard run their father's construction company, Mason Construction. Except Vernon does most of the work—he runs the city operations, the apartment blocks, hotels and so on—undoubtedly the brains of the brood. Richard looks after the seaboard—renovations mainly, a few houses. He's what you might call a playboy. Oliver walked his own path, debauched in its way. He's quite infamous for his young partners—specialising in farm boys fleeing the Calvinism of Pa van Heerden in Nieu Bethesda, or Oom Verkramp from de Aar.'

N'taks had not bothered to follow these biographical tracings. She had a bad case of social nerves, and neither the sports cars, nor the lesson on homosexual push and pull factors, had helped. 'You seem to know a lot about them?' was all she could muster in reply.

'You'll find that happens in this line of work. You get to know the big families, the one's that make things happen. If they're crooked enough they tend to become personal nemeses, or you're not really doing your job. I try to catch them out when I can, just to remind them that people *are* watching. They know me, you'll see.'

The scene they descended to was a grey stratus of sand, sea and then the sky. The clouds seemed to be darkening with rain. *Wiseman's* looked bravely on, a white, pavilion-like structure set at the back of the beach. Further away, towards the ocean, two pairs of red shorts fired the scene. They were the Lifeguards, centred around what appeared from a distance to be a deposit of kelp.

Only two men occupied the restaurant deck. One, surely, was the brother Oliver, gesturing wildly with limbs that seemed too short for his body, nodding a head that seemed too large.

'That's Richard, the playboy' said Woods of the restaurateur's companion. He was a much darker, rangier man, largely inscrutable behind sunglasses.

Woods led his reluctant protégé up the stairs to the broad deck, where discarded oyster shells, no doubt with their frayed ligaments of meat and flecks of coagulated cream, were scattered in such numbers as to suggest the passing of a group of Overlanders, a mix of young Britons and Australians perhaps, desperately fuelling up ahead of a conclusive African orgy.

'Mr. Woods! What a pleasant surprise,' cried Oliver, by way of greeting. 'You're here to pin those fat balls on me, I know. Terrible things—a disgrace! And *Wisemans* almost certainly carries its share of the blame. To that end I went and bought a new grease trap. It's round the back if you'd like to check, clean as a baby's bottom. So I'm afraid you'll find no flies on me, as it were.

'I don't see anyone swimming yet,' Woods parried.

'That's because of the cold. You should see people running in for the first time—they nearly choke! It's because the current pulls in molten iceberg from Antarctica, or Greenland, I can never remember which.'

'You mean the Benguela Current?'

'I suppose so. Whatever it is, it's good for business. No wet seats. Plenty of people with nothing better to do then eat. But sit, sit...Crispin!' he yelled.

A young man, hardly more than a boy, came out onto the deck. He was wearing a chef's outfit, and despite his young age already had the chef's disdainful expression: slightly flared nostrils and a turtle-beak mouth. With his brown curls and side-burns (and once kitchen-work had added its calluses, burns, and addictions) he would probably look genuinely fierce.

'Crispin, we're having journalists for lunch. I'd like for you to bring us something special. Perhaps your *loup a la peau croustillante*?'

'The grouper, you mean.'

'Covered with *mirepoix,* and a little compote on the side. Put the dried skin in the compote, like a sail, and—'

'A bay leaf across it, like a mast,' the youngster turned towards N'taks in embarrassment: 'he's such a show pony,' he said; 'Don't let him get away with reading from a script. It's absolutely his worst side.' Then shaking his head, he stalked inside. Oliver fondly watched him go

'Now,' he said, 'what are going to do about the environment, hmm? Today a seal washed up on the beach—the lifeguards are puzzling over it as we speak. No obvious sign of harm, except that it stinks like hell. One gets the feeling there's hardly anything left out there these days'—he was staring out roughly in the direction of Robben Island, where famous political prisoners once caucused over rock-breaking and seaweed harvesting—'As things stand, I have to buy all my seafood from a wholesaler a hundred kilometres down the coastline.'

N'taks laughed loudly—traitorously, despite herself. The jolly restaurateur was almost as effective with city ironies as her boss, perhaps more so, with his fool act and obvious culpabilities. John was certainly losing this one. He was positively reddening beneath his red beard. But he was far from beaten.

'You boys feel a need to perform some form of ecological restitution, do you, after tearing up half the land between here and the city? Out with the restios and rock-rabbits, in with the seals and puffer fish, is that it? Well, I can suggest something, if you have the money lying around. Marine life requires some sort of structure in order to live, such as a coral reef, or a forest of kelp. However, pollution levels in the bay are such that these structures hardly exist anymore. It's the same for all the coastal cities, only in certain places they're trying to reverse the process—they've started sinking ships where it's safe to do so. Boom, and voilá, the sea-life returns. It would only cost you a handful of millions.'

At this point Richard, square-jawed and silent, raised an eyebrow from behind his sunglasses, then stood and disappeared into the restaurant. N'taks felt this was rude and dismissive. But when Richard returned a few minutes later he was helping the young chef to carry the meal, and he personally served John his attractively arranged plate, which she thought was gracious and polite. And combative as he was, it seemed John Woods could be gracious too. He particularly eulogized the *mirepoix*, which he said tasted unlike he had ever known *mirepoix* to taste.

'I suppose its abidingly green appearance comes from the celery,' he said. 'I love celery. You probably know this,' he said to Crispin, who had remained standing by the side of the table, 'but I'll tell you anyway. The celery seed is used as a sedative in pharmacology.' Crispin grinned very broadly as he said this, showing small, slightly pointed teeth. N'taks began to suspect something was afoot. The Playboy seemed to be struggling with his composure. The restaurateur was too quiet, and now that she had looked more closely, it

appeared that her editor's *mirepoix* was indeed very green, much greener than hers, or anyone else's. Not that Woods had suspected anything. He was still expositing the merits of his favourite biennial:

'"I'm afraid of losing my obscurity. Genuineness only thrives in the dark. Like celery."' A quote by Aldous Huxley. You know, Huxley was a fascinating character who wrote about his experiences with hallucinogenic drugs…' and on Woods gabbled, quite liberated by whatever Crispin, or Richard, had stirred into his *mirepoix.*

At some point he simply stood up, and having excavated all of his greens to the exclusion of the fish, declared, 'I'm going for a swim'.

'That's the spirit,' Oliver declared and a great wave of laughter followed Woods out across the sand. Genial company, he thought to himself, as he approached the lifesavers. They were trying to bury the thing—what had Oliver said it was?—except their ingenuity extended to mere ineffectual tossing of shells and kicking of sand. The smell of carrion grew stronger in the air as he approached.

'What do you think we're doing?' said Woods, observing a need for foremanship.

'You'll never bury that thing with your feet, whatever it is'.

'Dead seal,' one lifeguard answered flatly.

'Oh yes, I remember now.' It had washed up high. John imagined it rolling over and over in the surf, flippers flapping.

'Is this really the best way?'

The blonder of the two lifeguards returned a mutinous look. His bleached hair and brown shoulders were a healthy golden brown, but two days of cloud had deprived his face of the sun's desiccating benefits, and it had become marshy with white spots and blood. Once an acne sufferer himself, Woods sympathised: 'you require some alpha-hydroxy for that,' he said, slapping his hairy cheeks. 'You need to dry the suckers out.'

The guard stared savagely down at the seal.

'The dogs will go straight for it,' Woods continued. 'You should take it off somewhere. There's a pile of loose planks to the left of the beach path—you could use one to stretcher the seal away.'

'There's a rip current close to the shore,' the pimply lifesaver said, indicating the real ambit of his duties.

'Is swimming banned?'

'No, you can swim. But stay shallow.' At that he tramped off with his associate. John leant over the hump. Whiskers were visible, like translucent shoots pushing through the sand. He brushed the hair with the sole of his foot, scraping until he felt something jelly-like, then something hard: a glaucous eye, a mouth ajar, showing teeth similar to a dog's. The frozen mouth seemed to breathe the seal's rot. He retched and turned away, then sniffed the cleaner air as if something was missing. When the smell came again he went stumbling towards the ocean, already pulling off his shirt and belt.

Straight in, a few furious strokes, glide, dip, tumble-turn, then a push off the sandy bed through a million bubbles... the sensory bends, John thought. It was not at all cold—a trick of el Niño's, perhaps. Floating on his back, looking down his nose, Woods could see the apartment blocks arrayed before him, like an inquisition he had escaped. The play of the curtains in the wind heralded rain, and clouds were rushing through mountain ravines to deliver it. Life in the city was not so bad, after all, he thought, as the first drops began hitting the water like fish rising. He recalled saying something about a ship—that sinking one in the bay would bring back sea life. The sentiment was right, though the Mason's would surely have dismissed it. Those poor, poor boys, he thought, harvested from their mothers like prize watermelons. It couldn't be easy, growing up in the shadow of a man like Bill Mason.

Just then his head bumped something hard: 'sweet Christ!' John yelled, and waited for the sight of his own blood. But it was merely a buoy, anchored a hundred metres out from the shore. In the obscure conditions he hadn't realised how far out he had paddled. But this is one of the dead parts of the ocean, he reminded himself. Still, he feared the buoy was sufficient on its own as an axis for life and death, in the form of something pulsing, elevator-like from the deeps, up the slimy line of the chain. Clouds were storming on the ocean now, huge box jelly-fish of the sky, dragging their frayed skirts across the surface of the bay. John spotted the red sparks of the lifeguards' shorts; joined, it seemed, by the darker, lither figure of N'taks. They were waving and shouting from the edge of the water, so he kicked the ocean viciously and waved crazily back before sinking. Now underwater, he worried they had taken his exuberant waving for distress. But he stayed under, slipping below the raft of mussels attached to the buoy's underbelly. Salt stung his eyes but he kept them open. It was, in fact, wonderfully cold. He expelled some bubbles and slipped further. Two easy strokes that could see him to the surface became (humorously) three, four. The thrill of dilly-dallying under water! Then suddenly

he was serious. His synapses finally fired. He pulled hand over hand up the chain, to the reverse slope of the submerged mussels, and crawled backwards up that, like an ant. On the surface he gripped the buoy like a hard stomach, and let his numbed cheek graze against the rough plastic. He breathed heavily. The ocean folded itself over as far as he could see. From behind came the whining of the lifesavers' jet-ski, its fibreglass belly drumming on the waves.

'Shit,' he spluttered.

2

Woods said nothing in all the drive back to his Bed and Breakfast, but when they reached a block of Victorian houses sandwiched between two busy one-way roads, he felt compelled to explain that, 'The balconies give onto a short feeder road between these two routes, and since the walls of the block meet both main roads almost directly, allowing no buffer of pavement, you will be obliged to make a little rush of faith just to rejoin the flow.' After a little consideration he added: 'Wheels spin, glass shatters, metal is rent. Much of Sea Point is like this. Muggings are common too—delinquents with knives or sharpened screwdrivers are everywhere. '

The houses scaled down with the slope, all identical windows, balconies, doors, and almost a full spectrum of colours. But for one unkempt and damp-looking frontage, it would have made a good photograph, even a postcard.

'This is mine,' Woods said. A nasty sign out front advertised his unit as *Spray View B&B*.

'I suppose you're going out on the town tonight?' he said, now outside the car.

'Why would you suppose that?'

'I don't know exactly.'

'Go and get some sleep.'

'I'm terribly thirsty. Do you want to grab a drink someplace?'

'I don't think so. I should finish my story, about the fat balls.'

'You needn't. I've thought about it and it's probably fine as it is. Keep your target broad. Allow the letter-writer's do the business-specific sniping. That's what the Letters section is for.'

'Right.'

Woods was intent on that drink.

'I think I'm going to go home. My nerves are shot.'

'Fine, I'll see you on Monday.'

'See you then.'

N'taks pulled away deferentially. Once she had turned a corner, however, she put her foot flat. It had mostly been true, what she had said. It had been an overwhelming day. But she was not going home. While John had been performing haruspices over the marine life, she had been talking to Richard. So what if he was a playboy, and a remorseless practical-joker—he had been very polite and interested. And he had finally removed his glasses, revealing a face

of near-perfect proportions, set with deep green eyes, which were somehow gentle and saurian all at the same time. Before the alarm went out about John, he had proposed that she accompany him to the cocktail evening at *the belle epoch*. Everyone knew about this extraordinary hotel, which had been built into a sea-cavern on the headland. The bynames were exclusivity, discretion. Except once a month, on the last Friday, the doors, or whatever they were, opened for the pre-eminent in Cape society.

'There are always media-men around,' Richard had said, not at all disingenuously. She had decided he was too afloat on his own wealth and good looks to resort to amatory tricks.

And why shouldn't she go? John would see it as a snub, of course, but he would never know. What did he expect, anyway? That she should aspire to be as despised as he was, on behalf of communities with which she had little or no association? No, she had a different life in mind entirely.

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Vernon Mason, Bill Mason's eldest son and particular protégé, waited by the penthouse elevator. The evening he had conceived as a way of keeping his sick, reclusive father in touch with the society amongst which he had been pre-eminent for so long, would be underway shortly. The lounges would become filled with his associates and acquaintances—politicians, magnates—and a great many people of absolutely no significance, who nevertheless had the required look of celebrity, which is to say they could at least pass as society figures in the advertisements that required them.

But it had happened that Bill, partly out of self-consciousness, since the palsy had collapsed the right side of his face, and partly because he was misanthropically disinclined, would not see a single one of the many guests that Vernon invited. He would only admit his three sons: Vernon, Richard, and Oliver, and then only at the beginning evening for an hour—a phenomenon unofficially dubbed *Mason Time* by guests, and one which—how well Vernon knew this—embarrassed his wife, the former Miss South Africa, Dianne Fouche. She was looking at him now with barely disguised resentment. Her expression said, No self-respecting woman can be expected to tolerate a husband who continues to serve the whims of an autocratic father, or something like that. She and Bill had hated each other from the start. 'What—' Bill had raged at her once, '—is the name Mason a little too proletarian for a

beauty queen? You'd do well to remember that one day, when you're old and ugly, the name Fouche will simply draw attention to your faded looks!'

If only she would try to understand what it was to be chosen by a man like Bill, Vernon thought. To be handed an empire founded on god knows what efforts and sacrifices. It required an appropriate homage. Everything they had they owed to Bill: the house, the holidays... At the very least Dianne could wait out his death. And such was the old man's withdrawal, now, that he had ordered the elevator's intercom viewing screen disconnected on the public side. He would be staring at Vernon's image on his own screen, trying, through the myopia of his age and condition, to determine if Vernon was 'safe'. Eventually the intercom crackled.

'Come up.'

The doors opened on what had once been the presidential suite. The gold-leaf wing-back chairs, and the marble table where the visitor's book had lain, replete with distinguished signatures, had long since been removed. In their place lay an emaciated figure on a single bed. There was no headboard, since the space was required for an oxygen tank. On a bedside table there was a cheap radio-clock, such as one finds in motels, as well as bar of white chocolate, a collection of political cartoons and a candle, which the property magnate had played with once, melting a zig-zag pattern across one of his ventilators. Now, even these last chosen things lay unused, unread, not eaten, not set.

'You alright?' said Bill, blasting air from pursed lips. He had worked himself up on a bank of pillows.

'Fine. You?'

'No sun.'

In emphysematic pidgin this meant the sun had not shone adequately for days. Vernon, who visited often, understood perfectly, and tended to mimic the old man's economy of speech, as if it might help Bill to conserve his breath.

'Clear tomorrow.'

'Richard, Oliver?'

'Coming.'

'Busy?'

'As always.'

'Hmm.'

They were content to be silent. Bill drowsed. Vernon felt he might do the same, sitting on a cushion of Bill's clothes, on a chair by the bedside. It had been a long, difficult week. Later the intercom chimed.

'Hi old man,' said Oliver, striding from the elevator to the end of the bed, where he took hold of his father's toes. Bill gave them a salutary waggle. Richard saluted.

Bill's three sons made an odd couple, it was often observed. Vernon and Richard looked almost identical, though having less responsibility it followed that Richard was the more beautiful. Oliver, well... it was immediately obvious that his body was much too large for its underlying structures. And his attempt to eat and drink himself into a state of physical proportion had failed—his unusually slender ankles and wrists would always give that away. There were those who disbelieved he was a Mason at all.

'Late.'

'Yes, yes, we're late. Sorry.'

Oliver always brought a platter of salmon snacks, which Bill loved. The old man took one now and licked the salmon off. Meagre sounds of appreciation followed—as much as one could expect after the radiation treatment had burned his stomach, turning him on to a diet of soft foods. A partial gastrectomy, moreover, had reduced the stomach's size and then the chemotherapy had changed the way food tasted. It had been an onslaught. But Bill had beaten the cancer. His appetite had partially returned and with it his enjoyment of food, though his palate, once attuned to the finest fare, was to remain dedicated to a clique of soft and drippy foods. He took these in strict order and at unvarying times, challenging the kitchen that made his meals to beat their record of buttered bread strips cut from a single slice. The strictness, the challenges—it was the way he had built an empire, applied now, reflexively, to what remained within his control.

'Crispin?' said Bill

'How are things with Crispin?' Vernon interpreted, but he needn't have, for it was ritual at these meetings for Bill to indicate his hope that Oliver's relationship with his young restaurant manager had ended. Bill was irremediably conservative. The issue of Oliver's homosexuality was consumptive. Nobody knew how he had found out, but he had, and for a time everyone, especially Oliver, had expected a disinheritance to follow swiftly. Feeling he had nothing to lose, Oliver had made a cabaret of his choices. The ploy seemed to be working.

'Oh you wouldn't believe what happened this morning,' he was just saying. 'Crispin found a hair on the soap...pubic.'

Vernon winced. Oliver was a good mimic, his impressions made more effective because he looked like nobody he would do, least of all the twiggy eighteen year old restaurant manager he was screwing. The old man was leaning forward to inspect the imaginary exhibit pinched between Oliver's fingers.

'"How did this get in my soap dish?"' Oliver piped; '"haven't I told you not to wash your little nuts directly with the soap. You must do it like this...' he was bent over in imitation of his partner, supporting himself on the dark, sea-facing window with one hand, whilst scrubbing furiously away at his backside with the other. '"...like this, and this, not like this. I bet you washed you ass as well gorilla-man."'

Bill had started to laugh, a portentous bronchial stir. Oliver was too far along with his story to notice. The old man gulped; tears welled in the red pit of his bad eye. He waved his hand feebly. Vernon leant across for the oxygen mask, and placed it over Bill's mouth and nose before releasing the valve. The smell of pink salmon climbed into the air.

'Enough,' Vernon mouthed crossly.

'Oh,' gasped Bill, his good eye closed as he concentrated on his breathing. 'Oh.'

Richard walked to the window that gave on the lounge. The party was well underway. Clusters of people stood by the massive windows, looking out to sea. It was easy enough to spot N'taks. One of perhaps a handful of black-skinned women in the lounge. She was talking to Dianne, he noted. A bad sign. He would have to quickly say what he needed to say, and then rescue her. Nobody compromised his coital aspirations quite like Dianne Fouche.

'I have a new contract, up on Vista Road. It's the plot next to your house, Vernon, where the boulders are. The consortium that bought the land wants me to build a perfect monstrosity. It's to be eight stories high in a more or less classical style. Pillars, pediments, arches, you name it. They still haven't decided whether they want a dome for the top, or a heli-pad. At the moment it seems they'll go for a dome.'

'Impossible,' wheezed Bill.

'Next door to Vernon's house you say?' Oliver looked anxiously from brother to brother. This was new. In a year of working together, sharing control of Bill's empire, the interests of his elder brothers had never crossed.

'When were you going to tell me?'

'I only found out this week. I thought I'd wait to see you in person.'

'Impossible,' the old man wheezed again.

Vernon was very severe. 'Dianne's going to very upset. Very upset indeed,' he said, as if to himself. But brightening he added: 'business is business, of course, though it's a pity about those boulders. Remember how much fun we used to have there when we were kids, hiding from the eucalyptus when the wind was up? Remember you used to call them widow-makers?' he said, turning to Bill. 'And we used to tell you that none of us had wives.'

This reminded Richard that his date was at that very moment probably receiving a blow by blow account of his superficial ways, and he took his leave. Oliver, never much good without his flawed middle brother, followed him out.

That allowed for Vernon to raise a problem that had arisen during the week, on one of his city sites. It had been worrying him greatly, and showed the potential to become much worse.

'Bones!' the old man exclaimed, jerking forwards off his mattress after the issue was explained.

'Yes, hundreds of them. It must have been a graveyard once upon a time.'

'Get rrr...' In trying to advise his son to get rid of the bones as soon as possible, it seemed a new and abundant catarrhal shaft had been opened inside the old man. Richard had to replace the mask and wait for some time before he could quietly state: 'there are new laws, dad.' He called Bill dad when the others were not around. It seemed to have a soothing effect. 'I'm required by law to engage the services of an architect, who then reports back to the Heritage Agency. I've got Professor Dunlop to come along from the Technikon. But I need a publicity guy as well, to get the news out to the community, in order to find out if there are any relatives out there. That takes longer then I thought. 60 days in fact. Now I've worked out that it will cost me a million a day if the work is suspended, and then there's no guarantee that the Heritage Agency will allow me to proceed. If somebody does lay claim to the bones—'

Oddly, the thought of his company haemorrhaging to the tune of a 120 million seemed to affect Bill less than Oliver's sexuality, or Richard's new contract on Vista Road, which Bill believed, for whatever reason, to be 'impossible'. Big sums were Bill's metier, and that is why Vernon had approached him. He felt he was drifting a little out of his depth, in the sea of new legislation.

After some moments of consideration, in which Bill seemed to be manipulating invisible pips out of his mouth, he rolled slightly to his side and

retrieved a notepad and pencil from behind the bedside radio. Raising one knee as a support, he began writing, and continued to do so for a long time, filling a page at the pace he could go at. The effort exhausted him. When he finished Vernon had to tear the page, and help his father to slide his leg back. He read the note.

'Christ dad, there must be other ways.'

Bill had shut his eyes, or at least his good eye was closed. The iris of the second had dropped sightlessly to the bottom of its socket. Richard thought his father might be sleeping. As he made to leave, however, the eyeball slipped upwards again and tracked his movements, and the old man wheezed, 'it's the only way.'

•

N'taks was not to be found when Richard finally made it to the lounge. He knew the reason why. But he did not challenge Dianne. That was not the way their game worked. It was an old game that they played and he was no slouch. Getting up the next day before dawn he posted a series of notices all down Vista Road. One, of course, went through the post-box of his brother's house. Then he went to bed, satisfied that the scores were level.

3

Sympathy will lie with Dianne Fouche

A great deal of her adult life had been attended by the racket of construction. That was Cape Town in the nineties for you—a pudding-livered alcoholic of a city, finally submitting to the doctors, surgeons and even psychiatrists of urban renewal. Entire spatial plans were being untied like sailors' knots, bygone architectures noisily restated, in any suburb one cared to visit.

After the birth of her second boy, Dianne Fouche demanded a move— 'Or I relocate with the children,' she remembered telling Vernon; 'and you visit us on the weekends.'

Vernon had suggested Blue Bay, because, 'They're all back there now—Oliver and Richard, Dad of course. It makes sense to have that kind of support nearby—especially seeing I'll be away most of the week.'

Dianne had insulated herself and her children accordingly. It was not exactly a stronghold she had chosen, but rather a delicate exercise in wood and glass, that rested on a river of boulders high on the mountain slopes. It was the height that made her feel safe, and the fact of the house's position on a cul-de-sac. In any case Vista Road, although a public way, had gotten a boomed access for itself. Visitors were required to make an account of their intentions—you had to know someone, or the guard would follow you in, and make a show of his baton and his radio. This was peace at last. With a satisfying reference to the clamour of geological processes, Dianne had renamed their new home *Chattering Stones*, spelling it out on the high garden wall with a march of bronze letters.

Through this same wall came the note: D*ear Homeowner, Blue Bay Construction will be blasting in the near vicinity on the following dates…*

Always an early riser, Dianne had been alerted to the activity in the cul-de-sac by the whining of her two Dobermans, Cough, and Sneeze. So responsive had these two effete animals become to place and the predilections of their owner, that they no longer deigned to bark, but scrabbled on the wooden floor instead, and stood with their hind-legs quivering.

In the light before dawn they followed Dianne down to the garden gate, more like rock-rabbits than dogs, the way they bounded from boulder to boulder. Afterwards, in the kitchen, Dianne opened a great tub of chipolatas (which added formidably to the fridge's bouquet) and in two of the sausages she made a slight incision, in which to conceal her dogs' anxiety medicine.

Dianne herself was perfectly calm, although the note rested on the kitchen table.

By the time Vernon woke up the note had been relocated to his chest, so that his eyes were forced into an early, painful act of focus.

'I meant to tell you,' he rasped. 'Richard only told me last night.'

'Dear Homeowner…'

'I know, Richard's a prick. It's terribly insensitive.'

'There's going to be dynamite going off fifty feet away.'

'Professionally controlled. It will only take a couple of days.'

'And then there'll be jack-hammers, angle-grinders, fat Coloured men with their arses sticking out, swearing at each other in Afrikaans.'

'That' a stereotype Dee, come—'

'How long will it take?'

'Well, I'm not exactly—'

'How long?'

'A year, perhaps'

'A year.'

Dianne went out onto the balcony. She lay back on a cushionless sun bed with her sunglasses on, and still in her dressing gown. Her fingers working absently on the heads of her Dobermans, which yawned in sedated distress. Vernon could not imagine a more implacable scene. He went to the bathroom and used the toilet: showered, shaved, and then dressed. He had time. Finally he walked out and sat on the edge of the adjoining recliner.

'Dianne, if Richard doesn't build this thing next door there's ten others who will. Don't think it will be easy for him either, when we were children—'

But a flash of colour and a sickening thud ended Vernon's plea. The Dobermans both scrabbled to their feet in surprise, knocking eachother about in the gap between the two beds. There was snarling. Dianne sat up, losing the advantage of her pose despite herself.

At first the scene seemed unchanged. Then a tuft of green down floated by on the light morning breeze. Vernon was the first to notice the bundle on the floor, by the plate glass surrounding the balcony.

'Crap.'

'Is it dead?'

As if in answer a red wing extended from the heap and began cutting the air this way and that, like an exotic fan. Then the wing went down and the heap was still. Vernon, attended by the two dogs, drew nearer. Only the bird's grey

tongue continued to move, poking in and out of a small spill of blood. Then that stopped.

'It looks like the bird from the tourist key rings,' said Dianne, postponing her anger for the sake of morbidity.

'It is.'

'I think Oliver has it embossed on his napkins.'

The town's mascot was quite unmistakeable: purple crest; downy green breast; the red wing pinions, each split by a black streak. When Vernon picked it up the head rolled on a snapped neck, like a decorated marble.

'What should we do?'

'Give it mouth to mouth!'

The death had struck Vernon deeper than that. Or at least he felt it might have. After the week he'd had—the discovery on the site, the distilled horror of his father's note, now his wife's outrage—his mind was vulnerable to portents. None could be more ominous, somehow, than the death of the town's iconic bird, stopped in mid-flight by a pane of glass he'd had imported specially from Belgium for the perfection of its curvature. Yes, he'd wanted to double his surrounds with that curved glass—the shapes of the boulders, the fluidity of the slope. He had tried to achieve harmony in his home!

Dianne was less troubled.

'Wrap it in a packet and throw it in the outside bin. Waste removal comes on Monday, so it shouldn't stink the place up.'

Pretending not to hear, Vernon raised the bird up in the melodramatic way: by the wingtips, as if it were a phoenix. He held this symbolic pose until a mite broke from the cover of the downy chest and raced along a pinion towards his hand.

'You dropped it.'

The dogs scrabbled and one (was it perhaps *cough*?) actually barked.

Vernon retrieved the bird once more and was trying with some difficulty, to once again spread its wings.

'For pity's sake Vernon, your bird has *rigor mortis*.'

One of the pinions came loose in Vernon's hand. Still he would acknowledge the incontrovertible facts of mortal chemistry.

'That's right, why don't you pluck the thing, right in front of the boys? You could make them a headdress each, play Indians in the living room. You don't get a full head of feathers, though. You're right down the pecking order—daddy's little helper.'

This method of attack he would not tolerate. The last couple of times she had been so suggestive, he had driven back to Cape Town. These precedents made it that much more difficult to bear. She was sending him back to the city. Nothing could be clearer.

Gathering up his keys and weekend bag, Vernon headed out of the house, descended the path through the boulders to the cul-de-sac (where the Dobermans left him) and stalked over to his car, at which point he discovered he still had possession of the stock-stiff Loerie. It flew through the air surprisingly well, like some sort of beach throwing-toy designed especially for that purpose, and landed near a picket that advertised: *Another Development by Mason Construction.* Vernon headed for the city.

4

Jennifer Glass had not been in the country for very long. What little time she had spent went towards research for her thesis: a bi-continental, multi-country study of slave life, quite fashionable, and thus extremely well funded.

Of all the city's Jennifer had been, she had found none more interested in its history of slavery than Cape Town. It seemed to need a sense of slavery for purposes both personal and political. The bookcases of the enlightened were already heavy with accounts both sensational and technical. It had excited her.

Yet somehow the Archaeology faculty at the Cape Technical University was the shabbiest she'd ever had to work in. It was shabby even in relation to stereotypical notions of archaeological shabbiness, with boxes piled so high on some of the laboratory tables one could hardly see out the windows. Also, it was quite uneventful, especially now that the younger students—those ubiquitous sun-bathers on the faculty stairs—were on their holiday.

One feature in particular, which she was now encountering at the top of the stairs, seemed to capture this spirit of decline. It had been there—a display of sorts—for the duration of her research, the same artefacts glued to the board: a silver teaspoon, a lizard's lower jaw and spinal column, sherd, coins. But like Charles Darwin's pet Galapagos tortoise, it appeared that the display's greatest merit was its subversive longevity, the fact that it had outlasted the excitement and validity of many scientific discoveries. As a form of in-house advertising it was quite repellent. No wonder the faculty was in dire straits, thought Jennifer.

At the postings board, amongst Volkswagens and text books for sale, she read an advert for an exhibition which seemed somehow related, at least in spirit, to the cabinet at the top of the stairs. An artist, it seemed, had finally been given permission to dismantle the bushman diorama in the Natural History Area of the National Museum. For years the wizened figures—plastic, not wax—had been stalking prey in a Perspex terrarium alongside the savannah and the forest dioramas, all replete with their respective fauna and flora in the way that children imagine Eden before the fall.

Their juxtaposition with the zebras and giraffes, the bushbuck and the warthogs, had been causing offence for a decade or more, and now someone had actually done something about it. A week's time. She noted it in her diary. That might provide a bit of interest, at last.

Jennifer went on to try her allotted computer, found the internet connection slack, and so proceeded, with a sigh of frustrated worldliness, to her usual

hidey-hole behind a stack of boxes in the corner of the laboratory. There slave bones awaited. She had been asked by the Head of Department to perform an analyses of a skeleton found, amongst many others, on a city building site them by the Head of Department. Although completely disarticulated by the bucket of a bulldozer, nothing could be less doubtful than the origin and fate of the bones before her. Teeth that had been sharpened into points pointed to what is now known as Ghana. And then there were the bones of the shoulders and arms, so overdeveloped, with stress fractures where the ligaments would have joined, as to suggest a life of extreme physical hardship. Isotope analyses would only confirm the well known story: a diet rich in fruit: childhood, West Africa, and in later life, a diet rich in fish proteins: slavery, Cape Town. The chemical evidence of Home and Away.

But almost immediately Jennifer heard voices approaching.

'They sprung out of nowhere,' said the first, rather excited voice. 'One moment I was standing amongst the bones, wondering what to do with them; in the next a boots-and-all lobby was chanting at me from the roadside.'

'What are they calling themselves this time?' asked another voice, calmer than the first—professorial, even.

'Piss Off!'

'Eh?'

'Piss Off—the lobby's name. They even had t-shirts.'

'Christ.'

The blasphemer was Professor Malcolm Dunlop, Head of Department, and simultaneously of the Archaeological Contracts Office—a savvy distributor of tasks, who often forewent the democratic processes required by his constitution. Jennifer could see him through a thin chink between boxes—those implausibly neat facial features, set in a hammock of neck, which hung imperiously out of frame.

She felt no immediate obligation to spring out from behind her cover. The stranger was too upset. The men would probably continue on to Malcolm's office, in any case, or at least she imagined so, until a third voice was heard.

'Show me on a map,' it demanded. Female.

'Yes... yes. Just as I thought. I'm fairly certain you're developing a portion of the Greenpoint Graveyard.'

'But I asked you about it before I bought the land.'

'You asked the Professor,' the woman corrected, 'and he said it was *unlikely* the graveyard extended that far.'

The complainant did not like this. 'What I want to know,' he bawled, 'is why the fuck there happen to be skeletons under my site? Who are they? Why have they not been exhumed before? And what do you plan to do about it? Need I remind you, Professor, that the Mason Behest relies on my being able to build my hotel? And you...' he lowered his voice to address the woman; 'you may find that I withdraw my support for your political games.'

So the speaker was Vernon Mason, the property developer. Jennifer Glass knew of him only as the intermediary between his father's riches and the decrepit, cash-starved Archaeology Department. There had been talk in corridors of this Mason Behest, a grant, which would save the Department from financial ignominy. There were those who said it represented something of a conflict of interests.

Only the woman's identity eluded Jennifer now. She sounded important.

'We have explained it all before, Vernon. Green Point, where your site is located, once lay outside the limits of the city. It basically became a dumping ground for the bodies of the unwanted: epidemic casualties, lepers, slaves...'

'Slaves,' shrieked the developer, as if a couple of them had just walked through the door.

'I'm afraid so,' confirmed Malcolm. 'I have a student analysing one of them now. I'm afraid its patently obvious.'

'No, no, no... you must be mistaken. The chief lobbyist said the bones belonged to his relatives. How could they possibly be slaves in that case? Cape Town hasn't had slaves in, what...'

'Vernon, get a grip of yourself, for goodness sake,' cautioned the woman. 'Who is claiming that the bones belonged to his relatives?'

'He said his name was Zebulon... something, something.'

'Oh dear—a fat man in a sari?' asked the woman; 'With filthy dreadlocks.'

'That's right.'

'Damn.' Malcolm groaned.

'That is very bad news indeed,' the woman continued bitterly. 'Zebulon swami-Roodt is a lifetime lobbyist. He was up front in the school riots of '76. He picketed in the 80's, sprayed slogans in the 90's... knowing nothing else, he goes from cause to cause like a locust, dining on the ethical chaos of our transition to democracy. He'll take on the lot of us, you can be sure. I can almost hear that voice of his,' her voice rose in a surprisingly spirited imitation of a protest chant: ""Stop unscrupulous development" "Foreigners and whites are buying out the city"'

'Or: "Science upholds racist imperial values,"' suggested Malcolm, rather vigorously, his neck colouring like a chameleon's lappet; "Science is not impartial" "I submit that..." and "I submit this..." bloody Neanderthal.'

'Now, now, Malcolm' said the woman soothingly; 'you're not still sore about that thesis of yours, are you, which Zebulon traced in the archives a few years ago? Personally, I think it was perfectly understandable, given your age and ambition. To think, all those Bushman women submitting their genitals to your measuring tape, just because you wore a white coat!'

Malcolm, waving his hand, signalled his dismay at the very mention of his 'extreme labial development amongst females of the khoi karoo' dissertation. Opinions on such matters had been rapidly evolving then, and as the extent of his insensitivity became clear, he had abandoned his dissertation and back-pedalled from from MAnth to Barchons, with glad haste. Unfortunately a copy of his dissertation had been interred in some dusty archive somewhere, and swami-Roodt, with his cockroach-antennae for racial scandal, had managed to find and expose it.

'Yes,' explained the woman, 'Zebulon tried his level-best to publicly prosecute our Malcolm as a crank evolutionist, and it very nearly ruined his career. And he'll try the same thing again. You can bet your last million that he has plans to turn your hotel site into a garden of remembrance, or a shrine, or both. As things stand he'll be asking me to personally interdict not only your operations, but the Technikon's involvement too. I bet his request is already there, resting on the mayoral desk. God, I hate this city.'

Jennifer gave an involuntary gasp. The third party was none other than Pam Goody, the city's incumbent mayor. Her instinct for political survival was legendary, and in political cartoons she appeared variously as the pimpernel, Houdini, Harry Wolhuter, Jerry to her political Tom cats, and once, mystifying just about everyone, as Chechnya. Her position as mayoral elections approached was once again precarious. One false move, the analysts taunted, and she would spend the rest of her days arranging lavender florets on the mantle of her golf-estate home.

'What will you do if he does want an interdict?' the developer whined.

'I'll serve it up with gravy. If there are slaves on that site of yours I'll serve that interdict piping hot, and call it a traditional Malay meal. Jews, Christians, Bahai—anyone else and I'd say go ahead, dig them out, build your bloody hotel. But slaves...'

'I'll lose millions,' moaned the developer.

Jenniffer heard a cellular phone version of Wagner's *Der Vliegende Hollander*, and steps leading out of the laboratory. 'Richard, I can't really talk right now...' said the developer, without a hint of the emotion he had recently exhibited. Then he was out of range.

'I feel like Job, only without the boils,' said the Mayor.

'Who said that?'

'Ceil Rhodes, after his house burned down.'

'We're certainly in a difficult position. It you allow Vernon to continue with his hotel you will be committing political suicide. They'll call you The white-washer of marginalised histories, or The repressor of the previously repressed. But if you give in to swami-Roodt, you lose your main financial backer. My faculty will be turned into a school of hairdressing, or something of the sort.'

Footsteps brought Vernon back in. 'Sorry about that... where were we? Oh yes, the worst day of my life...'

'Would both of you please calm down,' said Mayor Goody. 'There's always a way. How about simply removing all the evidence that proves the skeletons once belonged to slaves. That way, *Piss Off* will have no grounds for an interdict?'

'Grave robbing?' Malcolm spluttered.

'Please! Why would we want to stoop so low, merely to save Cape Town from another identity crisis? It would mean forgoing thousands of hours of community participation forums, letters to and fro, the financial haemorrhaging of our good friend Vernon, and all those touching candlelight vigils *Piss Off* are bound to hold?'

Malcolm was sold.

'How do you propose we do it?'

'You tell me.'

'Well, I suppose we could remove only the obvious signifiers—'

'What would those be?'

'Sharpened teeth. But that is strictly West-African custom. Malay slaves might have been buried facing the North East—an Islamic custom. That's bound to give away the game.'

'We turn them towards the south-west,' the mayor suggested.

'Fine,' said Vernon; 'but we can't very well have construction heavies work the site. Zebulon will know the difference.'

'Malcolm can have his students work the site. Promise them exclusive access for the sake of their dissertations, and when the site is cleared, we'll

simply take what we want, and claim that the site was vandalised. I'll make provision for a strictly on-site analysis. swami-Roodt can't stop me from doing that.'

'I suppose there are one or two doctorate students I might ask. Foreigners, mainly.'

'Perfect, they'll attract less attention. You set those earnest little archaeologists to work, and we can meet up next week when the work is done. No more private meetings though—we don't want anyone developing ideas. I'll be opening an exhibition in the natural history museum next Friday evening—we can meet then.'

•

When she was quite sure the trio had left, Jennifer came out from her hiding place and stood where they had been. She considered her position: she, an American student, had just eavesdropped on the brainstorming of a great political conspiracy, involving Cape Town's Mayor, a powerful property developer, and her own boss, Malcolm Dunlop. If that wasn't dramatic enough it seemed she would be drawn into the very centre of the plot, to play the part of unwitting collaborator. None of this would do.

But what were her options? The police and the papers would demand proof that a conspiracy was under way, and there simply wouldn't be any, not until it was too late. (Weren't both institutions infamous for their indiscretions and sloppiness in any case?) Any premature move, in fact, would seriously jeopardise her bursary, or even worse. She needed to consult with someone—someone who knew the city's darker character through long, painful association. Someone who could guide her through these dangerous complexities. But who?

5

Not long after he began excavating on Vista Road, Richard Mason made a troublesome discovery.

He came upon a stick-like object in the freshly turned earth.

Yussuf Aziz, his foreman, gave a portentous whistle. 'Human,' he said decisively.

But rather than alarm the workforce, Richard Mason turned the bone into a novelty. He twirled it between his fingers like a majorette, then placed it against his shin with a speculative shrug.

'Yes yes,' some of his men shouted; others disagreed.

He then measured the bone against his thigh. Another opinionated chorus ensued, until there came the sound of wood snapping, followed by an angry female yell. A company truck had apparently managed, upon turning too wide in the cul-de-sac, to destroy a cycad planted in the verge there. From the balcony of the nearest mansion, expletives rained down.

'Shit,' muttered Richard.

'Isn't that your brother's house?' asked the foreman.

'Yup. That's his wife, Dianne.'

It was the well-known microcosm of suburban life—a miniscule housewife berating a lumpy, working-class man. A Doberman (sneeze?) corroborated while a blonde tyke, one of two at the woman's side, bawled into his mother's dress. And yet, despite its prosaic ordinariness, this happens to be the hinge event, the true beginning of the action, in which two adversarial characters—the housewife and the property developer, sister and brother by marriage, more or less, now acrimoniously collide.

At high-pressure, therefore, Dianne exploded from her home, flashing passed the driver (who penitently removed a woollen hat) on her way to do battle.

'Incoming,' whispered Yussuf.

'Dianne, I've just witnessed the whole incident—'

'It was a rare and fucking expensive cycad.' She had left her shoes by the roadside and ascended in her stockings, an eroticism Richard did not fail to mark, for he was advanced in that way.

'I'm quite prepared to provide another,' he said, and meant it. Unfortunate incidents were budgeted for.

'Out of the question,' Dianne snapped. 'It is only possible to procure an aloof cycad on the black market.'

'Well then, I'll do that.'

'What?'

'I'll buy you a new tree on the black market.'

Dianne took a deep breath. 'I must say,' she began—a hungry lioness seeking the rear of a large, cumbersome quadruped—'there are a number of things we are not happy about. Cracks in our walls, noise pollution...my dogs are completely traumatized.'

'I'll have someone around to inspect the cracks.'

His sister-in-law closed her eyes. When she opened them again she noticed the bone.

'What in god's name is that?'

'Oh, er...' he mumbled, and it was enough. Despite a near complete ignorance of building law, Dianne Mason nevertheless understood, at some deep, perhaps intrinsically female level, that she had gained an advantage.

'Human?' she demanded. Richard could only say that he hoped not.

'It looks human to me—probably a fibula. Yes, I'm almost completely sure. You'll have to report it to the proper authority you know?'

'Dianne...'

'These things have to be investigated nowadays. You boys can no longer carry on doing things the way your father did. If you don't male the calls, I will. Don't think for a second that I won't. I'm fed up with this shit.'

When she was out of view, once more ensconced in her coastal home, Richard decided he had better call Vernon.

'Hi Richard,' his brother said—that oddly nasal voice. 'I can't really talk...'

'Richard, your wife has gone bonkers. She practically attacked me on my own site, for no reason at all. Now she's threatening to alert the authorities...'

'About what?'

'I found a bone—most likely a something or other from a cow, but I'd rather not have archaeologists swarming all over my site, thank you very much. They find what they want to find, those archaeologists, and there's a number of Kramats in the area... I can't afford to fall behind with this project, I really can't. The consortium is really pushing.'

'Ok, calm down,' Vernon said; 'I have a meeting this afternoon and then I'll call Dianne.'

Richard replaced the phone in his pocket. Yussuf, his foreman, had been waiting impatiently. 'Boss,' he said, 'You're not going to like this...'

6

It had been a grim weekend, with a high wind making it impossible to forget just how much discarded matter was about, discarded even by the wretched *bergies,* who combed the streets for odds and ends to put in their bags and trolleys.

His only guests had been a German couple, backpackers, who had refused to eat his hard-boiled eggs because they were laid by free range chickens. Woods had tried explaining that the distinction meant very little in South Arica, as it probably meant little anywhere else. *Range* was one of the most flexible words in the English language he'd said, and never had its limits been so tested as in their application to the filthy, shitty, fowl-dense runs he had once investigated for a consumer piece. The Germans had gone without breakfast, halving the ambit of his responsibilities, but in no satisfying way.

'What have you got for me this week?' he snapped at N'taks, when she was hardly through the door.

'A near-drowning off Blue4. A stoned old newshound.'

'Fuck off.'

'Well there's that, and the new vagrancy by-law has been approved. The police now have powers to arrest *bergies* and street-children. Along with the Fire Department, they're planning a sweep of various suburbs, and also the mountainsides.'

Woods groaned.

'What?'

'You know why *bergies* are called *bergies*, don't you?'

N'taks had no Afrikaans. Its political density had made her mind impermeable to it. She was not stupid, however, and by a triangulation of *bergie* with tafelberg (which she knew to mean Table Mountain) she was quickly able to answer correctly.

'Because they live on the mountain?'

'Right. The phenomenon of mountain dwelling is directly linked to the emancipation of slaves, in 1838, to be precise. They might have had their freedom, but it did not mean there was anyone to help them out. And of course many of them were turned out of the dwellings of their former masters. Subsequent colonial governments did not see this as their problem. Under Apartheid vagrancy worsened of course (if you think vagrancy is bad now, you should have seen Cape Town in the 70's and 80's) I recall observing a forestry

department clearing operation in 1979 or thereabouts. 895 bergies were arrested and convicted. But of course the jails could not hold them and so they were released again, and dumped in Woodstock and Observatory.'

'That explains a lot about Woodstock and Observatory,' N'taks said. Woods frowned.

'What?'

'Nothing.'

It was becoming clear to N'taks that Woods did have a few sacred cows after all. Not every issue was fair game. This, she felt, was inconsistent. Or perhaps they were his truer colours. Perhaps he did care.

'I don't understand why the fire department has to get involved?'

'Because they think the *bergies* start all the fires. The same justification was used in 1979, nothing's changed. There's still nowhere for them to go.'

'So I suppose our take on this is—'

'It's morally indefensible, always has been, always will be.'

N'taks was seeing a new side to the man entirely. It worried her. Woods' humiliation at the hands of the Masons had put her in the wrong frame of mind. How easily he reasserted himself. She told herself to be careful.

'What else?'

'A few letters. One from a woman who claims a man is exhuming a graveyard on the property adjacent to hers. She feels certain he aims to dodge the relevant laws.

'Let me see that,' said Woods. There was nothing extraordinary about the content of the missive. It was possible to view the seaboard as a dense system of slowly circulating bile, a matrix of stagnating vendettas, and you could expect to find a developmental process—an extra level being built in a panoramic view, a new kitchen, a virulent shade of pink—at the root of each. Malcontents invented stories like this before breakfast. The only difference in this case, was that the sender had identified herself. Yours faithfully, *Dianne Fouche.*

'Dianne Fouche... that's not—'

'It is,' N'taks cried; 'the former Miss South Africa, I met her the other night at the *belle epoch,'* she blurted out her secret before she could stop herself. Woods gave his beard a hard scratch.

'You went to the Mason's cocktail party? That's why you couldn't have drink with me.'

N'taks felt her skin burning.

'Yes. I'm sorry, I didn't—'

'How was it?'

'Richard invited me, then he never showed up, so I left.'

N'taks mistook her editors' silence as a remonstrance, when in fact he was thinking about the letter.

'Mason construction practically has a monopoly on developments in Blue Bay.'

'I believe so.'

'Well that would mean Dianne Fouche, who as you must have discovered is Vernon Mason's wife, has blown the whistle on her brother in law, and by extension her husband's own company.'

'That is interesting.'

'I'm going to go over there and see what this is all about. Do you think you could man the office today?'

'Absolutely.'

John was half out the door when the telephone rang. He paused and seemed to be mouthing something. '*Atlantic Sun*,' said N'taks; 'could you hold for a second.'

'You didn't sleep with him did you?' was what John had been saying. She flipped up her middle finger. His laughter echoed in the stairwell.

'I'm sorry, you were saying?'

'I would like to speak with John Woods please. I'm afraid it's very urgent.'

'He's just left the office, I'll take your number and get him to call you.'

'Who are you?'

'My name is N'taks, I'm a reporter.'

'What do you know about race politics in this city? Do you understand the new Heritage Act as it pertains to the exhumation of slave bones? I may have some sensitive information about a certain building site. But I'd need to know that I could trust you. I'd need to know what you would do about it.'

N'taks had no answers for the excited American (a sophisticated southern drawl—Georgia?) but the symmetrical intersection of her secret and the letter from Dianne Fouche was irresistible.'

'This wouldn't happen to concern Mason Construction, would it?'

'How did you—'

There was a long pause.

'We received a letter about it. Apparently some bones have been discovered on one of their sites, and they're attempting a cover-up.

'Oh thank god, I've been so afraid. I'm on the site now, working as if nothing's wrong. There's people protesting on the street, and still I thought I was he only one who knew. I just didn't know who to call. Or whether I should just run away. But then i worried there would be nothing to prove what had happened.'

The issue of the bones was obviously more serious and advanced than she or John had realised. Her heart was thundering in her chest.

'No, stay where you are,' N'taks advised. 'My chief editor is heading your way as we speak. His name is John Woods, you'll be able to trust him.'

'How will I know who he is?'

'He has a big red beard. You won't be able to miss him.'

7

'Hello sir,' Woods said jauntily, modifying his accent and adding an honorific according to an introductory technique he applied to both men of colour and men who wore helmets. The man before him was both things.

'I believe you have made a surprise discovery on your site?' Woods continued, making a spherical, magician-like gesture in front of his body; 'I wondered if I could see?'

Yussuf Aziz did not flinch. No, he explained, Nobody would be allowed on site without permission. He took out a pen and pad from a shirt pocket and began scribbling.

'Just be a quick stroll,' the journalist suggested.

'No.' Yussuf held out a scrap of paper with Richard Mason's number on it.

'Why not?'

'Safety.'

'What do you mean safety? You haven't started work yet?'

'I'm sorry, sir. Rules is rules,' said the foreman, returning the honorific with evident satisfaction.

Work had started, in fact, and Yussuf's obduracy was entirely owing to the discovery of another bone—several, in fact. Mr. Mason had been alerted and Yussuf expected him soon. In the meantime, his orders were to not let anyone near.

The refusal had Woods putting a hand out for one of the ribs of a 100 foot crane, as if he needed to ground the current of anger that was passing through him. It had not improved, this temper of his, but he had learned some control, and not a little self-awareness. He understood, for example, that he lacked the common touch. From an early age his body and features had counted him out of the competition for popularity, in spite of what he might have hoped for. He was fire, anger, passions ablaze. Even before he had facial hair his nick-name, sniggered behind his back, was Barbarossa, red-beard—it was because of the acne. And yes, he had become angry, intractable. One works with what one is given.

Over time he had learned to harness that negative energy—to focus it within himself the way a magnifying glass focuses light. And he had also learned how and when to aim it. The gouging of a pristine landscape no longer aroused his ire, for example. Those had been naïve reactions, and yes (he could admit it now) he had been rightly arrested for attacking that billboard. He now accepted

it as inevitable that the limits of the city would be pegged back again and again, until one day, surely, the entire peninsula, without exception, would become a glinting megalopolis.

Nor could Woods make a particular target of the pretension that tended to gather in these upper corners; or the efforts made there to ensure exclusivity, like the illegal boom at the bottom of the road. He had been content to fill out the security form.

Even the illegal exhumation of bones he could understand. He had seen developers lose their shirts for doing the right thing. Between legislation and practicability there were dangerous gaps.

No, he was no longer that small-time firebrand who would have mauled this foreman for no reason at all (he was simply doing his job—a livelihood was at stake.) John Woods had learned the virtue of patience. He could wait for Richard Mason.

In the meantime he would try and find the author of the letter, Dianne Fouche. He saw her silver Mercedes parked in the cul-de-sac. He knew it was hers because her name appeared on the door below an expressionist diagram of the sun. It advertised her business in the Blue Bay Mall: **Phaeton Tanning—benefit without the burn**.

Woods added these details to the composite picture he already had for Fouche: Former Miss South Africa. An independent business woman, who had kept her last name. A woman who was wilful enough to undermine her husband's business interests for the sake of her beliefs, or perhaps for the sake of a vendetta with her husband's brother. Either way, the picture was clear to John Woods. When he pressed the intercom outside *Chattering Stones* he did so familiarly, three quick bursts, as if he were calling on an old friend. On his left, as he was waiting, he noticed a collapse of organic matter—the sunken pith of a snapped off cycad cone, surrounded by browning fronds—in a verge garden. It was a language Woods could read. The inspiration behind the civil-minded letter now seemed quite clear.

Woods pushed the intercom again. (Two wet noses came to the gap between the garden door and the stone tile. They were big noses, big dogs, but strangely quiet). He pressed a last time, and was about to walk away when he heard a cry from above: 'Wait! I'm here, I'm here!' The former Miss South Africa was out on the balcony trying to keep both her whipping hair and a white dressing gown from flying in the wind. There was an edge of hysteria to her voice, the voice of a slight woman trying to discipline overlarge dogs.

'Hi. I was in the bath! Come on up!'

Two sleek Dobermans rushed out as the door clicked open, and began frisking Woods' trousers. With some difficulty he gained the garden, such as it was, and there he paused to admire the great stack of white boulders on which the house rested, planted with cycads, with black irrigation stems blooming silver. The symbolism was abundantly clear: an eagle on its eggs. The nest. Fierce maternity.

'Cough! Sneeze! Come on my boys, inside!' The dogs raced ahead up the path and darted through a carved doorframe. Woods followed and stopped on this second threshold.

'My...' he shouted.

'I know, such a lot of wood.' The door had hardly shut when Dianne was striding away, telling him she needed to change. Woods welcomed the time to look around. Straw hats and clutches of assegais bristled everywhere on the walls, which were panelled with teak. Rough-hewn slices of cedar sprouted raffia lampshades—Woods ran his hands over bark, quite tempted to pull a piece off.

'It's fallen cedar,' Dianne assured him, returning in a dress made of coarse white cotton. There were horns, helmets, bones, masks and framed scorpions. A seedpod in the shape of a snake lay coiled on a safari-trunk—all had died of natural causes of course, and were just to conservational taste. And then the stacks of enormous, plastic-covered books depicting big cats, big trees, as well as houses amongst trees, made entirely of wood, and some others amongst rocks and by rivers—the ways in which the rich suppose they return to the earth.

'Fascinating,' said Woods, standing by a display cabinet with handles fashioned from knotted branches. The artefacts inside were neatly labelled: *sandals of the vadoma, nigerian thunder god carved by a shango priest, female circumcision knife—Ghana.*

'Would you like some Kompuchea? Dianne asked, proffering an amber drink topped by a raft of mint and sliced orange.

He accepted. 'All of this is a little hard on first timers.'

'Vernon has decided to become an expert in African artefacts,' she explained, sighing deeply; 'I suppose it's wonderful for the children?'

Personally, Woods thought that the room would have been declared off limits to children, what with its spears and knives, and the explanations of ritual brutality it would one day oblige the parents to undertake.

After a few uncertain sips he found he was enjoying his... what was it... Kompuchea?

'I'm glad you like it. It's a Chinese drink that was quite popular a decade ago—a potent aphrodisiac, apparently. But then slightly worrying reports began leaking out about its effect on the bowel. Never had any troubles myself.'

For the first time the forthrightness of the former beauty queen struck Woods as a little eccentric. She had not even bothered to ask his name or business. But this was all to his taste. He determined to keep the tenor of the meeting informal

'You're a poor advertisement for your business.'

'Oh I'll never tan,' Dianne said, holding out her arms. The salon is just something that keeps me busy.'

'I thought you'd say that?'

'What?'

'That the salon was just something to keep you busy. I've noticed that about the Peninsula's boutique towns. The people who occupy them always talk about Their dream home, Their perfect location, The joy of being away from it all. But boredom has to be kept from the door in some way, and so a number of little businesses begin to open, and despite the best intentions of the owners, these institutions reflect their big-city canniness and presumptions. Immediately the character of the town begins to evolve.'

'What a perfectly presumptuous thing to say,' Dianne retorted. 'I suppose you're a messiah of some sort. You know, that's another phenomenon that comes to small towns from the big city—the know it all.'

Woods smiled in extreme pleasure. He was down to an orange slice and a mint stem in a tangle at the bottom of the glass, but sipped anyway, and the raft surfed into his mouth and nose, causing him to splutter. Dianne laughed. A clean, yet coarse sound, something like the tonal equivalent of her cotton dress. She reached a long hand towards him and pulled a tendril of some sort from his moustache.

'Oh.'

They spent an awkward moment amongst horn, mask and bead.

'I suppose I'd better show you where your boss destroyed my house,' she said at length. 'I'm quite embarrassed about it actually—it's such a little crack. I complained about it to no end, and of course it seemed to seal up over night. Now it seems to be hardly there at all.'

Woods realised that he had been mistaken for an assessor of some sort. It caused him surprising pain.

'I'm afraid there's been a mistake. My name is John Woods, I...' he hesitated. The beauty queen had frowned for a second, and for another moment, after her forehead relaxed, a bloodless white line showed where a crease had been. Woods wanted to take her face in his hands and smooth that place with his thumbs. He decided he did not want to put this woman on her guard. As she was now, genial to say the least, he might learn something of value.

'You were saying?'

'Nothing. Lead the way.'

Since there were wonders to be viewed from any side of the house, the bedrooms were arranged simply and proportionately around a central passageway. As he passed the first, Woods glimpsed the Eiffel tower depicted on wallpaper. In a second he saw a lariat. By the time they reached the end of the hall John realised that the couple, Mason and Fouche, had attempted something like a continental exhibition within their own home. The master bedroom's theme was undeniably oriental. The bed was low to the ground with precise corners and here and there fretwork dangled on hooks; on a dresser Hessian teabags were propped against dusty down-turned cups.

'Just look at this.' Dianne walked up the mattress on her knees and traced her finger down a very slight crack in the wall. To enable movement she had bunched her dress at the front, pulling it taut across her buttocks and revealing shapely calves. Not for nothing had she been the poster-girl for a popular hair-removal cream, thought John. He must have seen those calves a hundred times, usually between the sports and weather components of the seven-o'clock news. Not once had he experienced so much as an amatory tingle. But now that they were exposed before him in what passed as a scene from real life, now that he saw the moles and hairs (some longer than others, suggesting she shaved), he experienced an unprecedented surge of lust. The Kompuchea added its aphrodisiac heft, causing, by whatever oriental art, a vascularisation of the nether regions unlike anything he had ever experienced before. It somehow put in mind of fishing—the kind where a float is used, and if a fish is interested and nibbles the float ducks, and then rises again, ducks and then rises, and the fish tends to move on. Occasionally though (and this would be the scenario that applied to him then) there is no preliminary interest—no warning bites at all. An enormous fish simply takes the hook and dives,

bending the rod so that it feels it might snap. If the fisherman happens to be in a boat this fish will immediately head beneath what it regards as a shelter, so that the tip of the rod wants to follow, verily to go beneath the fisherman to the other side of his vessel. John was not exactly sure which component of this unlikely analogy represented his penis. Certainly it would seem to have something to do with the plunging float, the bending rod, the suddenness of it all. But owing to the tightness of his jeans he also felt part hooked fish (there had not been time for even the most cursory readjustment of his tackle.)

'Don't worry about the bed,' said Dianne, quite oblivious to his condition. She meant for him to walk upon it as she had, on the knees. John dared not remain vertical, and placing first one knee, then another, on the hard futon, he took his first tentative steps. The fish really went for it then, diving to the left and to the right. It tried desperately to throw its hook. In fact, it seemed to Woods that his inverse erection was attempting to perform no less than its fair share of the work of ambulation required to get him to the wall. They were bad moments. But even this terrible pain could not entirely counter the surge of excitement that underpinned it all.

'Hmmm,' he gave a nod that was both sage and savage, and delivered his diagnosis: 'a rare type of fracture...caused by only the wildest, ah, sexual activity.'

'Fiend!' Dianne cried. They both laughed at more or less the same pitch. John drew the merriment out longer than he should have, for he was concerned what would happen when they stopped laughing—not afraid of exposure, exactly, such was the masking tightness of his jeans, but rather, of the prospects of permanent damage that were beginning to present themselves. The doorbell saved him. Dianne went after it, allowing him a few moments to try the application of cold water in the bathroom. It appeared the problem was too advanced. Now John did begin to worry about exposure. It was quite possible, depending on the identity of the visitor, that he would be caught out in his assessor's act. He feared that very much. It would be judged to be nothing less than a conman's trick. John had reported such tactics a hundred times before—drug addicts that assumed identities to get into granny flats. Even if he was not recognised, the fact of his erection remained. Society could try him for a thousand different things, but to be known as the red-head who copped a stiff one in the presence of a former Miss South Africa was more humiliation than even John Woods was able to consider risking. With his dignity in mind he let himself out onto Dianne's balcony, and from there he

clambered down amongst the boulders, slipped out the garden gate, and made directly for his Fiat.

8

The newsman's retreat was not altogether unacknowledged. Richard Mason had arrived on his site and was in the process of being debriefed by his foreman when he spotted a man on his brother's balcony.

'That's him,' said Yussuf.

This man proceeded to let himself down to the boulders beneath, and then to slink, or so it seemed, out the garden gate. Richard's suspicion was aroused further by the man's walk. He looked like nothing so much as a soldier trying to make cover with a broken leg, and he did not once turn his face towards the site, as if he intended anonymity. And could it really be that this mystery figure was fully tumescent? Richard was inclined to disbelieve his own eyes, but some of the labourers had noticed the phenomenon, and they were nudging each other and pointing. He heard them say 'bonyelwa' and 'botsotso', understanding with some precision that these were adjectives for arousal and tight pants respectively. He became most eager to know the identity of a man who (it seemed undeniable) had made a cuckold of his brother. Still the stranger kept his face hidden. It was only when the old roué slid backwards most violently in the driver's seat of a little green car, his head whip-lashing to the side, that Richard saw it was the journalist John Woods. The fact caused him to feel anger and admiration simultaneously (the admiration one feels for the mongrel that fertilises the poodle). But of course his fidelity was ultimately to his brother's feelings, and in time he would work out the gentlest sort of way of letting him know.

For now he had his own problems to deal with. The red earth before him was littered with, amongst other skeletal remains, a human skull. One socket stared up from the red soil, and the men had gathered around as if they expected it to broadcast a football score.

The developer drew his foreman aside. 'We're going to have to work fast to clear this site,' he said. 'If anyone finds out, we'll have to down tools for a month, perhaps more.'

'It's happening in the city,' Yussuf concurred.

'You give the order. Offer the men double-pay if there's a problem, and triple-pay overtime—whatever it takes to get this rubbish cleared before nightfall.'

Yussuf winced. 'I'd rather not.'

'Rather not what?'

'I'd rather not disturb the dead.'

'Oh please Christ Yussuf, no mumbo jumbo today,' pleaded the developer. 'You know, in Rome they're emptying out the catacombs. In Egypt it's the tombs. It's all perfectly legal. There just isn't enough space, you see'—the sweep of Richard's gesture had taken in the craggy and expansive march of the Twelve Apostles. He slowly dropped his hand.

'Now here in the Cape we've gotten a bit silly,' he continued, bringing a mellow paternalism to his pitch; 'enormous building projects, which provide employment, and stimulate the economy, are put on hold, just because a piece of a pot, or an arrow-head, happens to turn up in the rubble. But you must see how it is, how it will be, when the authorities come to their senses—life must go on. We can't continue tippy-toeing around odds and ends.'

Yussuf sighed. He had heard it before. 'Boss,' he said softly, 'I cannot do this thing. It would be an impossible hypocrisy, since once a week I take my two sons to the kramat of Sheik Abdullah, on the saddle of Lion's Head. From there I point out Macassar, where the history of my people was founded, and the Tana Bahru on Signal Hill. There are kramats near here too, a little way down the coast. For all I know these'—he pointed at the skull—'could be Muslim remains.'

The developer rolled his eyes.

'Ok, fine. Yup, I suppose I can understand that. You have your beliefs.' He bent down towards the skull and tilted it slightly, so that the domed side stood upright. Then, squinting enigmatically out to sea, he performed a short shuffle in the dirt which culminated in a sharp swing of his right leg. The mottled half-skull sailed down the slope, deflected off an upturned wheel-barrow, and peppered a stand of azaleas on the far side of the road.

'It's sacrilege or your fucking job,' he yelled, before turning his back and advancing on his terrified labour force.

The diminutive foreman, who had been with Bill Mason in the time of the boom, sighed, and slowly walked down to the road, where he collected a plastic packet containing his lunch. He passed the fragments of human skull still lying on the tarmac, sighed again, and headed down to the sea.

•

Yussuf had never needed his own transportation. Every morning a company truck pulled up outside his house in Bo-Kaap, and he climbed in the back with

the other men, some of whom had already travelled an hour or so to be there. The truck then climbed away from the city between Table Mountain and the pinnacle of Lion's Head, before dropping into a new world entirely, a brief margin of incredible affluence, between the mountain peaks and the sea.

Affluent, yes. Well laid out and beautiful—certainly. But a preponderance of high performance vehicles meant he would not get a taxi to take him home. 'Fok dit,' he swore. 'Fok julle Mason's.' But he did not much mind walking in the sun. It was a time to commemorate, he decided—the day of his manumission from a tyrant family. Yussuf decided that was exactly what he would do. He would walk all the way into the city along the coastal road, and pick up something nice for the wife and children, something appropriately traditional to mark the historic nature of the day—fish roe perhaps, if his friend Miriam had it. Lovely fish roe, fried in garlic.

Yes, he would savour every second. In addition to the views from the coastal road, and the feel of the sun, there were the prostitutes in Greenpoint to look forward to. They were friendly girls, always smiling and offering a 'full house', or a 'pluk', and Yussuf liked that, because this was the so-called trendiest suburb in the whole city, or so the lamppost banners boasted, and the prostitutes, simply by plying their trade there, were sticking it to the day-dreamers who sat on the councils. Rome wasn't built in a day, was what they were really saying, when they offered a quick *naai*.

But for some reason, that morning, there were no prostitutes to be seen. No street kids either, fastened to their milk cartons of industrial-strength sniffing glue. Yussuf wondered if it had something to do with that new vagrancy bylaw he had read about. The police had no doubt performed a token sweep of the area and taken all the undesirables off for a free sandwich in some local and no doubt grimly overpopulated holding cell. But then Yussuf noticed, or rather heard, the crowd roaring in the distance.

It was a strange sound that came to him on the briny breeze, a refrain of piss off, piss off, piss off, and though there was no tonal variance to the call, the volume was building all the time, and not just because he was drawing near. It seemed rather an *ad lib-er*, as far as street demonstrations went, for even now, as he approached, a fat Rastafarian in a pink robe was indiscriminately handing out t-shirts printed with the words that were both name and legend.

The subject of the demonstration was clearly magnetic, drawing in all manner of riff-raff, including a couple of Germanic backpackers who, now in

their oversized shirts, and but for their sunburn, were largely indistinguishable from the others.

Before Yussuf could determine the reason for the gathering, the Rasta activated a loud speaker, and began pacing about.

'Our forefather's,' he shouted, 'and our foremother's, who fornicated so that we could be here today, now lie dead and buried behind me, on the site of this future-exclusive hotel.'

It was an interesting, barrack-room approach, probably right for the dissolute crowd, Yussuf thought, and his opinion was immediately borne out by the trade in diction that ensued: 'Foreskin' rang out soon enough, then 'forget' (lest we) and of course 'fokof', the popular Afrikaans palindrome.

There was a great deal of laughter, but then the strange priest, whoever he was, decided it was time for business.

'Whatever their sins, whatever their names,' he yelled, '—they are still our ancestors. They sweated and toiled and cleaned up everybody else's shit, and then they died and got planted out here. Now let me tell you a story brothers and sisters,' he said, gearing down with evangelical skill; 'let me tell you about a slave ancestor of ours who worked all his life only to die young of some agonising disease. That day all his miserable family and friends gathered at the edge of the town and wrapped their dead son and brother in a piece of cloth. Off they went, all crying and heart-sore on the dusty track, where hyenas and jackals were waiting for a chance to pounce.'

An attempt at a digestive pause was put paid to by a busty whore, who shouted: 'Wat dan?'

The speaker grinned. 'What then?' he echoed. 'I'll tell you what then—they dug a hole in the sand as fast as their fucking hands could dig, tossed the poor bastard in, and hoped it was deep enough that the scavengers didn't dig him out five minutes later.'

His audience was mortified. They held their breath for some redemptive detail, some small rhetorical ray of light, but it did not come. Instead their leader fiddled with the loud hailer until it began making an unbearable screeching noise, like a police siren. This seemed to be the desired result, for he smiled vaguely, and held the hailer aloft. His tricep sagged immensely and rivulets of sweat ran away into the pink swales of his robe.

'Now after such tribulations,' he cried; 'after risking their hides to plant our brother in the soil, some jackass called Vernon Mason wants to dig him out again, and throw his bones on the scrap heap, or even worse, feed him to the

scientists. I hope some of you know what scientists do with bones?' he taunted; 'because I certainly don't. Maybe they store them, maybe they have sword fights—who's to know? But I do know this: These are the same people who measured our heads in the nineteenth century to justify a hard time. And as early as the middle of this century, they were lifting the skirts of our sisters, and getting snap-happy with their privates. They will claim those days are over, but why should we trust them. I certainly won't. Not with my own genetic salt.'

Yussuf noticed that the mood of the predominantly criminal crowd had darkened since the activation of the siren. Only the backpackers continued to look at ease, grinning away at what was surely an absurd street act, even as small hands snuck into their backpacks. But the crowd had closed around Yussuf now and any hope he might have had of making an early escape was lost when the Rasta initiated this *coup de grace*:

'What do we say to rich fucks and scientists?' he demanded.

A tremendous response of *Piss Off* was flung back, and as the demonstrators continued to chant, the activist began jumping up and down.

Such was the spectacle of whirling dread-locks and locomotive bosom, that the demonstrators began a frenzied toyi-toying of their own, composed of who knows what proportions of hate and joy. At its chaotic zenith, several things happened in dizzying succession: an even louder siren than the Rasta's was heard, precipitating an oddly beautiful, flamingo-like choreography of heads, which soon became scrambled as pimps, prostitutes, lobbyists and the now the flushed German couple, sought the quickest way to break ranks.

The Rasta sought the safety of the fray like a hippopotamus seeks its element after a nasty fright on the shoreline. Once immersed, Yussuf could only occasionally glimpse the immense tricep through a shuttering of limbs. He made for that ample arm with the blind faith of a lost child, but as he approached, close enough to touch, the tricep rippled violently and a projectile went away from the mêlée. It arced briefly against the bluest of skies, and disappeared over the barricade. For a split-second, when the robed behemoth turned, Yussuf thought he glimpsed a thin, spiritually-advanced smile on the man's face. In the next moment a flailing elbow caught him on the side of the head, and the scene went dark.

9

A ceiling light appeared from a fog, which took it back and revealed it again; took back, revealed. Jennifer closed her eyes. When she opened them a face was above her—fleshy male lips that seemed near enough to kiss, a stethoscope. Malcolm Dunlop appeared beside this stranger, his own features mired within the eventless spread of his chin.

'You've suffered an injury to your head,' said the stranger. 'A missile from the road struck you'—he knocked twice on his own temple—'right here.'

Malcolm, with a woman's sensitivity, was quick to straighten the matter out: 'A clod of tarmac was thrown over the barricade of the building site and it struck you on the head, on the right side. You're going to be fine though. Doctor Philander removed the clot from your brain without complications.'

'I see,' said Jennifer, and she tried a smile. 'That's lucky.'

Philander, a dark-skinned man of medium height, flashed a very white pair of hands as he began explaining the possible consequences of Jennifer's injury, but, symptomatically perhaps, Jennifer found she was not capable of following. Her tranquilized mind had fixated on the doctor's extremely white hands, which played in the air before her like fornicating cephalopods. Were they covered in latex gloves, she wondered, or was the unfortunate doctor singularly cursed with albinism in his extremities? It would have to be the latter, she decided, since she would not be able to see his well-tended, pink fingernails if he were wearing gloves. An uncomfortable suspicion that she had recently taken a suppository began to grow in her mind. It grew until all her Quakerish propriety was abraded by the notion, which now seemed more like a certainty.

'You disgusting pervert,' she declared (only vaguely recalling that there were more pertinent issues at hand).

The doctor coughed, and continued with his prognostic speech. 'I was just explaining to your associate how a section of your prefrontal cortex, which, amongst other things, is where one's short-term memories are housed, has sustained some damage. It is not necessarily a permanent condition, but may take some time to...'

'I bet you do it to all the young girls—' Jennifer spouted, unable to stop herself—'wait till they're unconscious, and then it's "Torpedo armed—Fire! Torpedo armed—fire"'

Doctor Philander, who had indeed administered a standard suppository to ease what would have been unbearable post-operational pain, shook his head in despair and glanced down at his cursed hands.

'The painkillers have made her unreasonable,' Malcolm whispered. 'Don't take it to heart.'

'Yes,' said the doctor; 'I mean, no, I won't.'

'All the same, her reaction to you is a little alarming, perhaps if you, you know....'

'Yes.' The doctor sighed deeply. 'I'll be back in a few minutes.'

As he walked out in search of a doctor's white coat to replace his green surgeon's uniform, Malcolm set about trying to establish the severity of Jennifer's condition for himself. It was of the utmost importance that she be prevented from speaking about her work on the site. He began coaxingly:

'Jennifer, I can't tell you how shocked we all are that this has happened. It's created quite a stir. Even the mayor called to wish you a speedy recovery. She left these...'

Malcolm leant over to touch a vase of restios on the bedside table, and as he did so his hand passed over a cellular phone. He gave it a covetous look.

'It's to be expected,' she told Malcolm; 'All this attention, I mean—mayors and media-men.'

'Which media-men?' asked the archaeologist.

'The red-headed editor. He was on his way over when it happened. He had heard. I was going to tell him everything.'

The voice of the doctor intruded on Malcolm's shock.

'What was that about a significant discovery?' he asked.

'Nothing,' answered Malcolm.

Jennifer was chagrined: 'What do you mean nothing? Here the good doctor is terrifying me with talk of brain damage, and you're trying to subvert the one clear memory I have—our great discovery. Of course it is significant.'

'A storm in a teacup, really,' Malcolm tried guilelessly. 'With a bad ending, of course. Most unfortunate.'

'Perhaps it was to begin with,' retorted Jennifer. 'The first two skeletons we uncovered simply had coins over their eyes...'

'A European tradition,' Malcolm interjected.

'Yes. And then there were five which we found buried on their sides, facing northeast—these possibly of Islamic faith.'

'Quite standard,' cried Malcolm, his lappet colouring.

'But then I found it,' continued the student; 'an important discovery, I'd say. Certainly I've never seen anything like it before.'

The doctor looked dubiously across at Malcolm, who, while lifting the cuticle of a thumb, was preparing to whole-heartedly submit both himself and his high-powered colleagues to the old mill of Roman-Dutch justice. His one chance at leniency, he had always felt, resided in being the first to confess.

The doctor, his medical curiosity aroused, meanwhile hastened his fate: 'What was it Jennifer?' he asked. 'What did you find?'

There was a pause in which Jennifer looked at the doctor as if he were the very incarnation of ignorance, and then she said, 'Why, the two-headed hominid, of course.'

'Hah!' Malcolm was quite incapable of containing his relief. 'The two-headed hominid, that's exactly right, Jen, a quite remarkable discovery. In fact,'—he said, rising from his seat to perform a few golf strokes—'that's exactly where I have to be now—at a meeting with other eminent archaeologists to discuss the significance of this modern-day hydra. We're going to advise that the bones be relocated to the faculty without delay, and you can be sure, as the archaeologist who made the great discovery, that the analysis will be yours to perform.'

In a show of unmitigated affection, he bent towards Jennifer and kissed her on the stubble of her head, taking care to avoid the jagged line of stitching. A minute later he was gone, and with him went the cell phone that had lain beside the restios.

10

Things were looking bright on Vista Road.

With his labour force gouging at the top five feet of the site, Richard Mason contemplated certain possibilities for the disposal of the unburied.

Ordinarily the loads of soil and rock would go to Mason Sand and Gravel, once a province of the Mason Empire, before the company's bifurcation between himself and Vernon, town and city.

Ownership of the Plant had since become a vague issue—neither brother took money from it, and felt, if the Plant hadn't in fact passed to the long-term manager via some patrimonial act of their father's, then it might as well have.

He had been something of a family bogey-man, that long-term manager. Richard well remembered a thrashing administered by his hand to all three Mason brothers—not the incident that led to it, but rather the green and yellow variegations of the hose, the sickly smell of man-sweat, and, (Richard had harboured this detail particularly) the injustice of receiving several more strokes than his brothers. Oliver later explained how the manager had fairly cried with sadistic effort, and it may have ended badly, had Bill not then appeared in the yard.

The passing years had brought this consolation: that the manager, whose skin had seemed, even then, to be succumbing to some hypertrophic desert mould, had surely become a senescent, drooly shade of his former self, if he hadn't in fact died.

But Richard, of course, had never imagined circumstances such as these, and if by some chance the manager was alive, he decided he would require some form of psychological ballast, one of his brothers perhaps, in order to survive the encounter. He decided to call Oliver.

'Ol, what his name, the man who beat us with a hosepipe?' he asked.

There was the usual, mildly anarchic noise of the kitchen.

'The manager out at the Sand and Gravel plant?'

'That's him.'

'You've got me there. Wait...was it Gulliver...Gulliver Shields.'

Richard watched the hairs on his left arm rise. 'That must be it. How about going out to Sand and Gravel with me this evening? I have a surprise for the brute.'

'A surprise?'

'It's more like a practical joke.'

'Sure,' said Oliver, for whom practical joking had long since supplanted more fertile forms of curiosity. He hoped it was going to be a good one.

•

The sprawling Plant was some distance from Blue Bay—over the saddle, through the city, and beyond the spaghetti junctions on the other side, where oil-spattered oleanders led out into the isthmus. Then a long run between parallel lines of rail and stacked ship containers, out beyond the sewerage plant even, to where, in a hummocky, faltering sort of way, the flora showed signs of reasserting itself.

It was dark when the brothers arrived, the yard weakly lit by towering lights, and all was still, except for a lone figure approaching on a grey track.

'I suppose you want to see your catch, but?' Gulliver rasped. Both brothers remembered something then: how the Antipodean man, whose accent the years had failed to efface, had had the strange syntactic habit of using 'but' as a form of punctuation. It tended to have a quite discomforting effect—one felt, for example, that Gulliver Shields was always on the verge of gainsaying his own statements, or disclaiming them. Oliver had in fact very nearly cried, 'but what...'

It was not the start Richard had imagined. He had sent the bones ahead in Dumpers, like trinkets hidden in a Christmas pudding, and all afternoon had played over in his mind a vengeful scene in which the sand, sieving before Gulliver's eyes, began yielding its terrible secret—Femurs breaking the surface like narwhal swords; skulls emerging, like amorous trilobites, from their particular element...

As the sand ran out the bones would begin leaping, smacking off the side of the sieve with a sound like castanets clacking—a wild, disarticulated dance would ensue, driving the old man half-mad with fear.

But this had obviously not been the case. Gulliver's face appeared impassive as he led the two brothers towards a dozen or so Hessian sacks against the wall of a central shed.

'I'd say there are about twenty of them,' he said. 'At least I counted twenty skulls.'

Richard was busy with his own arithmetic, angrily disarticulating the old man's skeleton in his mind, collapsing him into a pile in the dust. Two Gulliver's to a sack, he judged.

'I'm not sure that they're all adult, though, but,' mused Gulliver, his voice occurring at a low gravity in the moonscape of the yard; 'but if they are, they would seem to be a very short crew indeed, Chinese perhaps.'

A knowing smile crossed Oliver's face.

Even before the old man had started with the talk about Chinese skulls, he had begun to suspect that the practical joke was actually intended for him. Soon enough he expected his friends to leap out from behind the industrial machinery, the floodlights would come on, music would start playing... he would act surprised, of course, for Richard had obviously gone to lengths over this one.

Everything about the scene suggested mischief. The abstract way Richard was just now looking at an eight-tonne roller, for example, and was he not now suggesting, 'we could roll them,' as if it were the most natural thing in the world to roll human bones (the existence of which was far from certain). Absurdly obvious as the joke was, Oliver was nevertheless impressed by its historicity. Richard's decision to draft in a bogey-man from the past, in a setting as yet haunted by shades of corporal punishment, was not far short of genius. And the manager's act was faultless too—he betrayed not the slightest hint of irony or emotion.

'Yes, the bones are brittle,' he was saying in answer to Richard's question: 'The roller should do the job. We can mix the dust with the sand to form mortar.'

'Bone marrow in the grout!' Richard quipped fraternally

'Have you ever disposed of human remains before?' Gulliver asked.

'No.'

Though the question was intended for Richard, It was Oliver, feeling addressed in the very nature of the enterprise, who answered so readily.

'It seems easy enough, but. You say to yourself: "I can do this; they're not people any more, their flesh has gone and so have their spirits and souls,"—if you believe in that sort of thing—but afterwards, when life becomes a little strange, as it seems to, or a little sad, you might wonder to yourself: "does it have anything to do with those bones, but?"'

Seeming to teeter on the precipice of further philosophical inquiry, the Australian again changed tack.

'I take it you discovered the bones somewhere near the top of the town, under a great arrangement of boulders?'

'What...yes,' gasped Richard; 'but how did you...'

'And did it not strike you as odd that there were no coffins, no other earthly possessions... an old comb, or a favourite watch?'

'I suppose; I never really gave it much thought. My objective was to clear the bones as quickly as possible, before they attracted attention.'

'Of course, but. Yeah, of course it was.'

'Listen here,' yelled Richard; 'I didn't come to enlist your help in white-washing a crime scene, if that's what you're supposing this is, but... Shit,' Richard hissed. The syntactically aberrant conjunction had, like a plague-ridden flea, leapt out of Gulliver's grammar and landed amongst his own. The night was not going at all to plan. Oliver, on the other hand, was quite satisfied that a great and complex joke was underway—perhaps the best ever. He felt honoured to be its butt.

'I suppose you could call it a crime scene,' Gulliver said, regardless of Richard's protest; 'and by that token you could call me the criminal. Not quite the mastermind though. Your father was always better in that role. Big Bad Bill—I have yet to know the felony that man would not commit.' There was an edge of menace to the manager's alliteration. Richard found his hair was on end again, whereas Oliver considered the attack on his father's character further proof that all was going to plan. In fact, as a contribution to the cadence of the spoof, he decided to appear offended. 'My father is no criminal,' he yelled.

'My bum's a canary he isn't, but, mate,' the manager fulsomely.

'No he isn't,' Oliver parried.

The old man fell to silent internal considerations, his melanoma-studded lips quivering ever so slightly and his head nodding and shaking in schizoid turns. Eventually he said, 'Yeah, why not, why not,' turned abruptly, and dimly beckoning at the brothers, entered the shed through a dark aperture.

'This is it,' thought Oliver, and as he followed into the inky black he could not suppress an excited giggle. 'Sorry,' he said.

When the bang of a door jamb rang out he fairly yelped in anticipation, and as a strip-light ticked on above, resolving a jungle scene of inanimate objects—cables, spare parts, papers—his self-control finally broke.

'Where are they?' he yelled, 'come out come out. The joke has gone on long enough.'

'Patience,' Gulliver hissed dismisively, moving from box to box along a certain section of wall-shelving. At a point he gave a satisfied grunt, and pulled

a blue trunk to the shelf's edge. With another grunt he swung it onto the table and stood panting for breath, his hands splayed on the trunk's lid.

'What you are about to see nobody knows,' he began, with complementary gravitas. 'This has been my secret for thirty-two years, since before either of you were born. Your father and I made the discovery when we were building his hotel on the headland. But he does not know these things still exist. He thinks all has been destroyed.'

Gulliver opened the trunk and from it removed a small silver case, the lid of which he lifted with a fingernail. Several brown stripes, hardly more than silhouettes of rust, could be seen against a background of oxide green.

'Needles,' he said, as if they were the very elements of life.

There followed: a thimble, comb, buttons. All trembled in his fingers.

'And then there's this,' he said, reaching in with two hands: 'We found it at the head of the cavern, like a kind of gravestone. The clapper's rusted tight, but you can still make out the engravings... '

The brother's leant in towards the rusted bell.

'That's Chinese to me,' said Oliver.

'An archaic form of Mandarin, to be precise,' Gulliver replied. 'Once the graveyard was discovered we had to move fast—if news of these artefacts spread, we would have been interdicted for sure, even back then, when it was possible to erase entire epochs before lunch. Bill ordered me to get rid of the problem: the bones, the personal effects, the bits and pieces from the ship...everything.'

'Ship,' scoffed Oliver, walking away to the other end of the table. He was bored now, and beginning to suspect that he had made an ass of himself. Richard remained enrapt. Something seemed to be stirring deep inside his chest, some more or less vague sensation that had aggravated to a definite twinge once or twice during Gulliver's tale.

Uncertain as this feeling was, the implications of Gulliver's secret box were clear enough. Gulliver and Bill had discovered a graveyard, years ago, on the site of his father's signature hotel. Of all things, the bones had belonged to sailors—Chinese sailors, it seemed. 'Now, what the devil did the Chinese want with Blue Bay?' Richard asked himself, and despite an almost complete absence of historical knowledge, he felt fairly certain that the incidence, on a South African shoreline, of centuries-old mariners of the orient, was chronologically anomalous, if not downright absurd.

Portugese, Dutch, British, and now the blacks—that was the South African story, was it not? Incontrovertible evidence of a Chinese presence—and incontrovertible these artefacts certainly were—would therefore seem to represent nothing less than a subversion of the historical status quo. Hell, the Chinese might very well have discovered the country, Richard thought, alighting, with the butterfly-lightness of the abysmally ignorant, on an extremely profound hypothesis.

Yes, there could be no doubt of the meaning and significance of these artefacts. But the decision to doom them to obscurity, while reburying the sailors' skeletal remains under an enormous stack of granite, was understandable too. He decided that the vague feeling of uneasiness in his chest must have its origin between these two points, which he was as yet, and owing to the very nature of his upbringing, quite unable to delineate as right sentiment, and wrong sentiment. A full acknowledgment of *right sentiment*, was an ethical post beyond the horizon of the developer's vision. But something inside of him was reaching for it all the same—a blind, weak, nevertheless elemental instinct. Some part of him was reaching vaguely out for the old man as well, who had harboured such corrosive knowledge for so long—nothing less than the truth about the country's discovery. One might diagnose this phenomenon as the dim stirrings of conscience, or even empathy, so long suppressed as to be nearly obsolete, like an appendix or a tonsil, and when Gulliver finally asked, 'what do you want to do?' Richard so nearly answered, 'the right thing, of course,' and he was close, so close, to knowing what that was.

It was at this juncture that Oliver, who had absented himself to investigate a collection of owl pellets further down the table, came over in great excitement shouting, 'Rick, Rick, you won't believe this, but there's a pointy little skull in this owl shit,' causing the brief existential crack that had opened up in the low sky of his brother's mind to close over and precipitate the following inquiry, directed at Gulliver in lieu of a judgement about the fate of the bones: 'What do they eat?' he asked.

The old man sighed, and seeming to shrink a little more he said, 'Rats. This place is fucking crawling with them.'

11

John was in a bad mood, and it was not being helped by his failure to find parking anywhere near the National Museum.

'Remind me why we're wasting our time here,' he demanded.

'You know very well why we're here,' said N'taks.

Woods was not sure that he did, exactly. When he had finally returned from the office, after failing to discover anything about the exhumation of bones on Vista Road, he had been surprised to find N'taks in a state of high excitement.

'Did you find her?' she had practically yelled.

'Find who?' John had said evasively, and it had taken some time before he was able to understand what exactly his junior reporter was talking about. It seemed that somebody, an American, possibly an archaeologist, had called to say that she was party to a great secret about some bones found on a site belonging to Mason Construction.

'Naturally I thought she meant the site on Vista Road,' N'taks had said. 'I told her you were on your way over. She sounded very scared.'

Woods had been dismissive. He was tired of hearing about bones. He had been from pillar to post and found nothing. Another goose-chase was the last thing he felt like.

But that night Woods' German lodgers had returned, burgled and traumatised, with fantastic tales of rioting in Green Point. He was inclined to disbelieve them too, until a segment of the evening news seemed to confirm their story: a lobby for the protection of a graveyard had lost control of its demonstration outside a major city development. A student-scientist working on the site had been hospitalised.

Almost immediately the phone had rung. 'Did you see the news?'

Woods admitted that he had.

'The site was owned by Mason Construction.'

'I know.'

'And the student who was injured was an American.'

'Yes, I'll admit it's all very compelling. But let's not jump to conclusions here. Did you get a number for your informant.'

'No, but I may be able to dig something out of the phone's caller registry.'

'Good, you do that,' said John. He did not understand about such things as caller histories. He mildly resented that his junior reporter did, and in fact this whole affair had him feeling uneasy. He preferred being the innovative one.

The following day N'taks had found three possible numbers, all cellular. To each of these she had sent the following SMS message: *Hope U OK. We need 2 meet, say when and where.*

'Who shall we say it's from, so that she trusts us,' John had wondered aloud.

'I said she would recognise you by your red beard.'

John had winced. 'Okay, say from *red beard.'*

The first message that came back had begun, '*Mmm, red beard...*' and seemed to have as its object a naughty swap in the lavatories along the promenade. A second reply had come much later, and seemed as likely as not to come from their mark.

'*exhibition at the national museum tonight*,' was all.

'Are you sure it's not just an auto-generated invitation. I've gotten the newspaper onto thousands of lists in my time here. I doubt that the hospital would not have released your informant so soon.'

N'taks had no such doubts. 'She must be really desperate. I'll go alone, if you're not interested.'

'Is that so? And how far do you think you'll get without a red beard?'

N'taks smiled. 'Come on, it's going to be interesting. The exhibition has a politically sensitive theme, apparently. Just up your street'

'Goody,' said John.

•

Woods drove up and down Queen Victoria Street, but the lines of parked vehicles on either side were unbroken. He was driving very carefully, since he feared that the slightest stimulation—a pothole in the road, for example, or a rumble-strip—might cause a relapse of the Kompuchea-effect. Eventually, by ramping a curb, he snuck into the Cathedral parking lot, and drew into a bay marked Reserved—Bishop of Cape Town.

'You can't park here.'

'I have. Put you valuables in the cubby.'

'Is it safe?'

'Safer than walking around with them. This area is not so good. The cubby has a lock, in any case.'

N'taks handed over her wallet, and only kept the phone from which they had contacted their informant. Woods added his own wallet. And then, as if on cue,

a rather bent looking man emerged from the shadows of the cathedral masonry. He was wearing an orange bib with the words CAR GUARD sewn on in reflective silver. The first letter R had come loose, except at its lowest stitches, so that it hung perfectly upside down and flapped a little as the man staggered.

'Oh what now,' John groaned.

The guard slumped against the bole of a ficus growing from the tarmac.

'Will you look after the car nicely for us?' N'taks asked sweetly.

The guard curled his lips back in a toothless smile and nodded his head. The smell of sour wine came off him

They set off, John insisting it would be better to approach the National Museum down the Parliament Avenue. Although there were lamps amongst the oaks, their bulbs were the energy efficient kind, casting that sodium light which seems rather more portentous than preventative. Every bench had its dozing tramp, and here and there on squares of manicured grass kids were attached to bags of glue, their mouths more like ostimal stoma than mouths.

'So much for the new vagrancy by-law,' said N'taks, feeling more than a little concerned for her safety. 'Parliament Avenue is a dormitory.'

'The law only kicks in from tomorrow. All these fellows will spend the weekend in jail.'

'Then what?'

'They'll make biscuits out of them.'

N'taks stopped abruptly by a foul-smelling pond.

'Enough with the prophet-of-doom act,' she warned. 'I'm finding it difficult to respond appropriately. And you know—not everything is ripe for your kind of humour. Some things are better left alone.'

Woods was hurt. Despite appearances he did not enjoy being known for his pessimism. It was worse, he knew, for a man of his age and racial description, to be known that way then for any of the other vices in the cluster: drink, obesity, unrepentant materiality. It was all forgivable, it seemed, so long as one occasionally exhibited traces of hope. And yet his bravura moments grew out of his pessimism. The truth, if it ever came to him, wore a sallow grin. Being faithful to this recognition, he often felt, was the only integrity left to him, and he should not therefore, and indeed seldom would, allow himself to feel shamed. But for some reason shamed was exactly the way he felt now, in front of his young protégée. Not for the first time did he look forward to the day when she would move on, into the bigger life.

They turned into the Kompanjes Garden and almost immediately he felt compelled to make a further jaundiced observation. On the other side of the Edwardian rose-beds, beyond the choked fishponds, a procession of diminutives was being led into the museum by an enormous figure in a robe. One by one they were shaking hands with a woman in mayoral red. Flashbulbs flickered amongst the columns of the classical building.

'Are those...' Woods wanted to say Bushmen, but he was fairly certain the term was out of favour. San was out too; Hottentot—certainly. That left Khoi, or was it khoi-khoi, or perhaps khoi-khoin?

'Bushmen,' N'taks said. 'An international panel of anthropologists recently concluded that the term is not racist after all.' She gave him an impish smile. 'Political correctness is coming full circle. You should pay attention.'

'What are a group of Bushmen doing here?'

'They're a delegation of community leaders from Namaqualand and Botswana—the artist invited them. She has apparently dismantled the Bushman diorama which for years has insulted visitors by its proximity to meerkats, chimpanzees and other residents of the natural history wing, and reassembled it in ways that point to how the Bushmen suffered, and continue to suffer, Western intellectual trends like social Darwinism, and so on.'

'You've done your research,' Woods observed. As a further libation he added, 'it sounds poignant, very poignant indeed.'

N'taks simply laughed. 'Stick to being irreverent,' she said. 'Poignant my arse.'

They climbed the granite stairs—Woods now feeling extremely pleased—and followed the last of the delegates into the lobby, where the mayor was indeed welcoming them by the circuitous name.

'...surely a welcome step towards the reconstitution of the country's past,' she said, declaring the exhibition open. Then, with the robed giant and the artist—a middle-aged woman with the look of a sure-footed academe—she led a procession into the exhibition room.

'The fat man is Zebulon swami-Roodt,' Woods explained; 'a rogue historian and activist—first man on the scene of any and all collisions of cultures. He's an excellent sort of a fraud, really: a modern-day Laurens van der Post.'

Polite shock was rippling around the exhibition room, in which plastic limbs and other body parts had indeed been provocatively rearranged, dismembered, and scattered, all in close proximity to steel instruments of measurement, gleaming dissection knives, and the jottings of a craniologist. Woods, with his

acute sonar for dissatisfaction, had noticed a number of frowns on Bushmen faces.

'Something's wrong,' he said, and in spite of himself he moved close enough to the front of the procession that he could hear swami-Roodt in his ambassadorial role: 'They're unhappy that the arms and legs of their ancestors have been mutilated,' he was saying. 'I'm afraid your western symbolism is quite lost on the descendants of the /Xam. To them, an image of an ancestor, be it a painting or a plastic sculpture, might as well *be* their ancestor. It is quite sacred.'

Far exceeding the requirements of the tongue click, the Rastafarian had managed to send a large section of spittle in search of the mayor's jacket. The result brought N'taks near enough to a break with decorum that she forced her gaze down, and there, on the floor, made a discovery that quite eclipsed the rearrangement of body parts as a culturally-relative *faux-pas*. Separated by nothing more than a thin plastic lamina from the various trampling heels, boots, and academic loafers, were a thousand or more Bushmen photographs describing, to a greater or less extent, the dehumanisations inflicted on them by Victorian science and attitudes.

Woods' eyes bulged when his junior reporter pointed this out.

Then he looked to the artist, who, while explaining the significance of the audio visual component of her exhibition, seemed to be lifting her chin ever higher in an attempt to keep the general gaze above the culturally charged floor. This very tactic was to prove her undoing, as one of the wizened leaders, eyes drawn to an inspection of the ceiling, lost his spectacles over the back of his head and bent down with considerable evidence of arthritis, to fetch them. His reappearance was most vigorous—a reflexive leap which carried him well above the heads of the others. In seconds his reaction was being replicated by young and old alike, the ancients rising to heights proportional to the greater reverence in which they held the dead, and none rising higher than Zebulon swami-Roodt.

Even the Mayor, somewhat rushed by this complex political moment, began a cautious hop of her own, which was distinguished neither by gentility or fervour.

A general movement in the direction of the exit bottle-necked somewhat, and an old dowager was heard to say—she was waiting, hopping— 'Such difficult, difficult moments in the redrafting of the past.'

•

Some time later, in the museum's Whale Well—a great Victorian-era chamber in which entire Cetacean skeletons were suspended from a multitude of cables—Mayor Goody and Malcolm Dunlop were working in tandem to allay the fears of their benefactor.

'She's been reduced to a state of near idiocy,' said the professor, referring to the American student. 'Believe me—she's been imagining two-headed hominids, no less.'

Vernon was not convinced. 'What if she snaps out of it?'

'Malcolm's the head of the Archaeological Contracts Office,' said the Mayor. 'He'll find her something to do far, far away.'

'And what about this journalist who seems to know something about what *we're* doing.'

Malcolm took a cellular phone from his pocket. 'That may pose a problem. He made contact today—he wanted to fix a place to meet. So I've told him to come here. At least that way we'll know who he is.'

The professor began typing a message into the phone. He had gotten as far as, MEET ME AT THE... and intended saying *BATHYSCAPHE*, but thus far, in six or seven tries, the phone had only provided him with the name CATHY.

'Oh give it here,' said Vernon. The instruction was completed and sent, and all eyes went to the deep sea-diving vessel, which, for as long as anyone had been in the room, had broadcast a record of whale and porpoise calls.

When a red-bearded man drew alongside the vessel with a pretty companion, Vernon was able to identify him immediately as the journalist who, in an article he had read years ago, had described his father as 'that natron-faced land-grabber Bill Mason.' Natron, Vernon had subsequently discovered, was the salt used by Egyptian mummifiers to draw life fluids out of their dead. That the term should have been compounded to describe his father's face had not seemed a fair press, even to a child, and Vernon had never since been able to entirely dissociate his old man from the mystique of ancient Egypt.

Mayor Goody, for whom community journalists were something like remora fish, always feeding on scraps of officialdom from the underbelly of her administration, was likewise able to make a positive identification: 'That's him,' she said. 'That's John Woods. He's one of those micro-operators of journalism:

consumer and environmental issues, by-laws and suburb by suburb legalese—a real dung-roller. I'd say we should be very, very careful not to let him get anywhere near our absent-minded student. He'd find a way to jog her memory for sure.'

'Who's that with him?' asked Vernon.

It was Woods' unidentifiable female companion who in fact had hold of the cellular phone. That she was in on the intrigue was confirmed when Malcolm received another message: *Wr R U?*

At this point Vernon was distracted by a surprising figure. He'd seen a fair spectrum of human beings during the night, but this person—a young white woman, wearing what appeared to be an African-style bee-hive head-wrap—struck him as particularly unusual. Of course it was not at all uncommon these days for white women to appropriate traditional clothing conventions, but this particular wrap was remarkably tall, and quite spotlessly white. Its wearer oscillated through the crowd, dipping occasionally, rising—always a part of her white-cone head in view—and it seemed she was heading in their direction. Malcolm signalled the first sign of trouble when he swore under his breath. 'Jennifer what— what a wonderful surprise. And there I was feeling so certain that Doctor Philander was going to keep you for another week at least.'

'Oh I've been looking forward to this for some time,' said the student. 'And the doctor thinks I'm much, much better. Certainly there's no danger of me ranting on about two-headed hominids tonight—I believe I was quite mad the other day.'

Malcolm licked his lips in anxiety.

'But you know, professor, there was a two-headed deposit after all, I visited the site again before coming here and there it was, plain as day. What's more, there's a perfectly rational explanation for it. Given the dangerous nature of the surrounds at the time when the graveyard was in use, bodies were obviously buried in a hurry. It must have happened on occasion that a grave was excavated on top of an existing, deeper, grave. In time the wood from the uppermost coffin—if indeed there had been a coffin at all—would have rotted away, allowing the bones to subside. Give it a couple of centuries and hey presto, a two-headed man! So you see, I wasn't so mad after all, my prefrontal cortex simply scrambled the information it was holding.'

'How very interesting,' said the Mayor; 'And how is your prefrontal cortex?'

'Oh my short-term memory is a perfect mess. I can hardly remember a thing leading up to the...er...I'm calling it an accident. But I had to get out of there,

you see. What kind of hospital is it when some bastard steals your cellular phone right from under your sedated nose? A sorry state of affairs, if you ask me.'

Malcolm made the necessary introductions in the moments after this attack on public services. 'Meet Mayor Goody,' he said, '...meet Vernon Mason, the owner of the site.'

'Oh you must be haemorrhaging terribly,' said the young woman; 'financially, I mean. The whole thing is such a mess. I've been thinking particularly about the man who is allegedly threw the rock—Yussuf Aziz I think he's called. He's a father of two, apparently, and a loving husband, who just happened to be having a very bad day. Of course there's no way he could have targeted me from the other side of the barricade, so the charge of attempted murder is quite ludicrous. I've been thinking of appealing for leniency, but I haven't known exactly how best to go about it. Does one appeal directly to the media? I would be most grateful if you could offer me any advice.'

These words were addressed to the Mayor, but such was her surprise at finding the student so lucid and humane, that she stammered and fell silent, quite stumped. Vernon very quickly summed up the situation. With his businessman's acumen, he understood that he could trust neither the academic nor the politician to save the day. Every moment that the student remained in view, even under her formidable camouflage, was a moment closer to disaster, for the journalists were in the Bathyscaphe, combing the room, by ultra-sound, it seemed. The moment to act was now. There would be no other.

'Professor Dunlop, can I have a word with you, outside,' he said. The Professor nodded vigorously. *Better to travel hopefully than to arrive* he thought, as they left the mayor to the humanity of the American.

When they exited the museum there was a heavy mist amongst the trees of the garden. In the light of the lamps it looked almost yellow, solid—more like churning cream than vapour.

Vernon was already talking as they descended the stairs. 'What do you have in the way of uncomplicated bones?' he asked

'What do you mean?'

Vernon proceeded to outline his stratagem: 'We need time to remove the slave bones from my Green Point site. But what with swami-Roodt's crowd

pulling all night vigils, and an archaeologist who is fast regaining her senses, we simply don't have a chance. Disaster is closing in.'

The professor, better versed in the stratagems of defeat, could only think blankly on this problem.

'So what we need to do is create a distraction.'

'What kind of distraction?'

'A parallel phenomenon—a site, at some distant remove, where there also happen to be 'slave bones'.

'I'm afraid I don't know of any sites like that at the moment. We're out of luck.'

'Ah, but you have no imagination professor. That is why we require bones—'uncomplicated' ones. We're going to make our own parallel graveyard.'

'You can't just make a graveyard. It would be impossible to replicate all the dynamics of ritual, the processes of time.'

'But you can make an exhumed graveyard, one in which bones appeared to have been scattered about my heavy machinery.'

'Yes, it would be possible to do that.'

'The deception need only work for a few days. Long enough to draw your student away while we remove the bones.'

'You can always keep an archaeologist busy for a few days. But what about swami-Roodt? How do you plan getting Piss Off away from Greenpoint.'

'We leak the story to the local press.'

'They'll come running from their church bazaars.'

'Exactly.'

Certain issues were still unclear in the professor's mind.

'What about that site? Surely you're not considering putting this on another developer, your competition.'

'I'm considering doing it to my brother.'

'*Il Principe*,' the professor moaned—a hoarse reference to Machiavelli's horrifying work of political philosophy. He was quite scared of his company in that moment.

'Will you tell him?'

'No—Richard cannot know. The power of the deception relies on his authentic reaction to whatever transpires. We must bury the bones at night—tonight.'

'Tonight!'

'Tonight. So I must ask you again—what do you have in the way of uncomplicated bones.'

The professor was scandalized, upset, aghast. But he also knew that his one and only shot at survival lay in following the nefarious instincts of this businessman. Fear had focussed his mind—his capacity for constructive criticism had returned.

'Tonight—but we'll need help if we're to do a proper job. You and I will not be able to bury sufficiently fast.'

'Not me at all. The site is next door to my home... if my wife spots me, our game is up.'

They were then approaching the edge of the perimeter fence of the Kompanjes Garden, and became distracted by a scrambling in the underbrush. From a gap where a metal bar had been removed, there appeared first an arm, clutching what looked like a car radio, then a leg, then the head of a child no more than ten years old. When he saw the two men he worked a screwdriver from his ragged sleeve and made a few stabbing thrusts. Ever so slowly, never taking his eyes off the two men towering above him, the child moved along the line of the fence, and then he was off, down parliament avenue with his prize.

Vernon turned to the professor, who was breathing heavily from the shock of the encounter.

'I know where we can find you a midnight labour force.

•

Up by the bathyscaphe, on the mezzanine level, the two journalists stared grimly down at proceedings.

'I don't understand,' said N'taks.

'Perhaps you should try making a few high-pitched noises of your own,' suggested Woods, for whom SMS—a noun apparently, posing as an acronym—had always seemed a suspicious way for people to communicate. (All those contractions and linguistic tricks—it was killing the language, what was left of it in any rate).

N'taks had started to cry. 'What a pointless, pointless evening,' she said; the tears were rolling off her face.

Woods put an arm around her. 'You're just overwhelmed,' he said, by way of consolation. When a photographer appeared out of nowhere he said, 'fuck off,' but the man took their picture anyway and dashed off.

N'taks was the first to notice the hole in the Fiat's back left window. The lamp above the cathedral parking had gone out but she could see that the glove compartment had been opened. Colourful wires spilled out of the place where the old radio had been. There was no sign of the guard.

'I'm sorry John.'

Woods dived into the vehicle and removed a fisherman's priest from under the driver's seat of his car, then ran to the gate of the Company's Garden, which was chained, but so loosely that it was possible for a man to slip through.

'I wouldn't...' N'taks started to say but John had already vanished into the gloom of the park.

He went sprinting down a bricked path, stick-arm swinging. Here and there he paused for the sounds of spooked squirrels and pigeons. He passed an aviary, skirted below a statue of Cecil John Rhodes: knee bent, walking stick at the forward angle.

There was an abundance of sticks and supports, in fact. Rhodes had one, Woods had one, an ancient oak, its roots pulling out of the moist earth, had been propped up by a great wooden 'V'. A garden that inspired notions of infirmity and violence. Finally Woods came to a halt in it. He was tired, and the thief could be hidden anywhere. A circular thicket on his left was as good a place as any to make the obligatory investigation—the one that would distinguish his reaction from absolute futility.

Without pause he walked over the manicured grass, into the bed, and pushed between bushes into open ground. There in the weak lamp light that made it through the leaves, he could make out signs of vagrancy: a rag spread neatly on a stone, an extinguished fire, empty bottles of cheap wine. The furthest reach was dark enough to conceal a man. Woods addressed it.

'Hey you!' he called.

'Hey you, I see you!'

There was no response and no movement. His vision started swimming, intent on making some form out of the dark. He gripped his stick tighter.

'Hey fucker!'

'Fucker fucker fucker!' he hurled the priest at the dark. It hit something solid with a thud, causing the black outline of the bushes to shiver. Woods froze a few seconds, then bolted. In parking lot, beyond the garden fence, he spotted the orange bib.

'N'taks!'

'I'm fine,' she called back. 'Everything's fine. Let's just go.' She pulled him across to the car. They passed the drunk, who was lamenting over the pile of glass cubes. The car engine drowned him out.

'The guard!' N'taks warned. Woods found the bib in the wing mirror; arms flapping unintelligible directives in the dark. 'Thank you.' N'taks handed a few coins through the window. The drunk fumbled them.

'They must have used a screwdriver,' said N'taks. She closed the cubby. 'How much was in your wallet?'

'Just cards. They'll only be good for spreading jam with once I've cancelled them. Insurance will take care of the rest. The bastards have nothing.'

'You'll need a case number.'

'Nah.'

'You will. Anyway, the police need too know these things. They plot incidents on a map so they can tell where the problem areas are.'

'You think we have problem areas here?' John said. His words carried much bitterness.

•

'That's a problem area,' Inspector Gray said. He was standing behind a worn wooden counter. On the other side—the public domain—on a bench against the wall, a woman wearing a full cloak, with a headscarf and veil, was sitting between two full carrier-bags. She did not look impatient. Of course it was difficult to tell

'Do I know you?' asked the Inspector, losing interest in any answer before it came. 'We think there's a small gang operating in that area,' he continued to explain. 'Smash, grab, disappear, probably in a car. There were a dozen break-ins last month. Just yesterday there was a mugging.'

'A mugging—was anyone hurt?'

'Nah,' said the inspector.

'I can't imagine what tourists must think,' said Woods. He was flying through the necessary forms. His insurance company would require a case number. That was the only point to the exercise, as far as he was concerned. And yes, he and the Inspector had crossed paths before. This was the very same man who had arrested him for vandalism all those years ago. He had seen him now and again since, and had come to regard him as something of a parallel self. He'd had a single star on his epaulette then. He had two now.

'Tourists,' the Inspector said meditatively. 'I've had a number of them in here recently.' Woods smiled a little, remembering his flustered Germans.

Now looking at the woman on the bench, the Inspector lowered his voice. 'You probably haven't heard, but some tourists found her husband washed up on the beach this evening.'

'Oh—' N'taks cried.

'In about four foot of water. He hadn't washed all the way in. He was just rocking there in the waves. Some of the swimmers eventually worked up the courage to go out, but when they tried to pull the body it wouldn't come. That's when they noticed the rope around the man's neck, and the bell—

Not like a cow's bell,' he continued. 'This was a bloody great thing. In fact...' The Inspector's shoulders rolled as he lifted the bell up to the counter-top, taking care to position it so that the widow would not see.

'As you can see it is quite a strange thing—very old, and covered in funny writing.'

'Chinese,' said Woods. Scenting a story he could actually report, he produced his identification (the Inspector pushed it back—he recognised Woods now) and a note pad and he prepared to ask some questions.

In answer to the first the Inspector said, 'His name was Gulliver Shields. He ran a Sand and Gravel Plant out along the west coast road. It's a strange way to do it if you ask me.' This last comment was whispered.

'Do what?'

'End it. Suicide.'

'Is that what it was?'

'Undoubtedly. The man was quite a loner by all accounts—not together with his wife at the time'—he nodded again at the peaceful-looking woman—'seems she's taking it hard though. She's been sitting here since this afternoon. Nobody understands a word she says. Spanish, or something. If she's still here in an hour I'm going to have to call the hospital.'

When Woods felt he had enough information he shut his notebook.

The Inspector wrote a number at the head of his report form. 'You can call this number tomorrow to get your case reference code... actually, better call the day after, tomorrow it's going to be a real circus in here—we're combing the entire city for vagrants.'

'Ah yes, good luck with that,' said Woods.

Part 2

12

Summer was in.

The plant life was audibly turning inside out in its haste to grow. From Vista Road the boulders that spilled out into the ocean, black with cormorants, looked like splinters, the surf at the edges like dead skin.

Richard Mason was not concerned with anything like that. He was staring at his building site in great bafflement. His labour force was likewise staring. Some giggled. Others looked deeply concerned. The word 'tikoloshe' whispered, and again the tone was either nervously humorous, or deeply superstitious. Richard, however, was not about to believe that the scene before him was the work of little demons, despite the evidence of tiny tracks criss-crossing the site. He was inclined to suspect Oliver, whose own suspicion that the Sand and Gravel scenes had been in jest, had been difficult to allay.

With the arrival of an odd-looking couple, a fat man and a young woman with an extravagantly bandaged head, he felt surer that this was the case.

'We're here to perform an assessment on your site,' the fat man said. He claimed to be a professor.

'It has been reported that you have made a discovery of human bones.'

Richard laughed. The workers laughed. The professor dabbed at his sweating face with a handkerchief.

'My associate Jennifer Glass will in fact be performing the assessment. Her specialty is slave bones.'

'Slave bones? You're a little off on your history, I'm afraid. I happen to know that there were was not a single habitation along this part of the coastline until a hundred years ago.'

'Well of course that's just the thing about discoveries,' the bandaged woman cut in; 'they require that nobody know-wholesale ignorance. I have been led to believe that your find may represent evidence that a community of escaped slaves lived here, on the mountain slopes. They would have been very secretive of course, evading history, as it were, for fear of the punishment that awaited them if they were caught. This might well have meant being clapped in irons for life, or a scourging with a bunch of elastic rods, followed by the

application of a red hot-poker. If they were lucky it would be the gallows, and then their heads displayed on a pike.'

This violent litany produced a favourable impression on the workers. It was quite understandable that you would want to hide out and die on a forlorn mountain slope rather than face a scourging. If it were not for the appearance of Dianne Muir with two leashed Dobermans, Richard felt he would have enjoyed a little more of this conjecture, but the presence of his sister-in-law recalled him to the encounter weeks ago, when she had made certain threats. Suddenly he was filled with doubt.

'What's going on?' she asked.

'It's none of your business?' Richard shouted, but she had already unleashed her dogs. They were going around sniffing at the crotches of his labour force.

'Those are bones aren't they? I knew it. Hundreds of them. Are you from the paper?' she asked the professor. He introduced himself.

'Even better. Hah, I just knew there was something fishy going on. I warned you Richard— I said, if you don't alert the authorities, then I'll be the one to do it. And now it looks like you're in a fix. Well, you'll know better than to attempt a cover-up next time.'

'Do you mean to say that you didn't request a survey of the site yourself?' Jennifer asked.

Before Richard could answer his phone rang. Now the colour really did drain from his face.

'Could you repeat that?' he said. 'Yes I knew Gulliver Shields— yes, Sand and Gravel was once the property of Mason Construction, but what does it— what do you mean "do I know anything about his death?" Suicide, you say— A Bell! Well that's very mysterious indeed— No, no further comment. Is that you Woods, you slinking little shit-pot? I saw you the other day with your pants on fire, don't think my brother won't hear about it— when this catches up to you you'll wish god never gave you one—'

'More trouble, Dick?' Dianne said, clipping the dogs back onto their Extendee-leads.

•

At Wiseman's the staff seemed not to be coping with the lunch rush. Oliver did not seem concerned about that. With his brother seated next to him on a bench at his usual booth, he was peering at *The Atlantic Sun*.

'You would think that they would have been a little more imaginative than that,' said Richard. '"suicide tolls his last" perhaps, or "man enters afterlife with a splash and a clang".'

'Richard, you need to be serious.'

'I have never been more serious in my life. Any moment now I'm going to kill somebody.'

Around them the circus of overstretched service continued. Things were particularly tense in the poorly ventilated kitchen, where it was 10 degrees hotter.

'That's nice,' a waitress said, banging through the swing doors with two arm loads of platters and sloshing finger-bowls; 'we're killing ourselves here and old Oliver has time to read his newspaper.'

The young chefs—Crispin, and a West-African named Manyx, had both had the anarchic mood. The one pitted himself against the other.

'Perhaps Crispy he worked 'im too harder at 'ome,' Manyx said, gyrating his hips.

Crispin took up a knife and sincerely threatened to kill anyone who aspersed further about his domestic arrangements.

But Oliver's laziness was dispiriting, and Crispin took his role as intermediary seriously. Removing his plastic apron (but forgetting his hair-net) he exited the kitchen and made for Oliver's favourite booth. Standing behind them, he waited for Oliver to finish speaking.

'You don't think it was Gulliver who did it, do you? Reburying the bones as a last act, to spite the company?'

'I don't think he meant to be found. I think he simply chose his anchor wrong.'

'He used the very same bell he showed us the other night, with all the Chinese characters on it.'

'Are you sure it was Gulliver?'

'Absolutely. He washed up a hundred yards away from here. His face was a little blue but otherwise quite recognizable. There was obviously no time for... you know, whelks and so on.'

'What happened to the bell?'

'It went with him to the coroner's. I suspect the police have it now?'

'Damn.'

'What?'

'That means Woods has seen it.'

'But he'll be unable to make any connections to the bones that you removed from your site, the Chinese artefacts—only Gulliver knew about those.'

'But that's just it. The bones (somebody's bones, at any rate) have reappeared on my site.

'It does seem as if somebody has tried to set you up. You need to make sure that nobody can access that Plant.'

'I'll hire security. The Plant reverts to Mason Construction, apparently. It turns out Gulliver had it only in terms of a life lease.'

'Ultimately, you'll have to think up someway of getting rid of the evidence. It can't stay there forever. Someone's sure to find out. By the way did you know Gulliver had a wife?'

'No—I'll have to track her down too. Find out what she knows.

'Richard—'

'Yes?'

'Perhaps you should discuss all of this with Vernon?'

'Not a chance. The less he knows the better. This has all happened because of that— I could kill that wife of his. And you know, she's banging the journalist behind his back. I saw him sneaking out of the other house the other day.'

'That old red-beard?'

'The same.'

'Well—'

These family matters caused Oliver great distress. He was sweating badly. 'I need a drink, where the hell are all my— oh, hi Crispin. I forgot how fetching you look in a snood.'

Crispin stepped up to edge of the booth and aired the kitchen grievances. He practically demanded better ventilation, fans.

Oliver affected a baby-baby voice: 'is it really so bad? Well we'll just have to see what we can do about that then.'

'Fuck off Oliver, something needs to be done about it right away. We're going mad from heat.'

'Oh I'm sure another few days isn't going to kill anyone,'—he turned to Richard—'half of my staff come from the Congo and the other half from the

Platteland—I doubt any of them are vulnerable to extreme heat.' What he meant was: 'not a single one of them will dare complain, because there are a thousand others waiting to take their places, ventilation or not.' Of all Bill Mason's sons, it was Oliver, oddly enough, who had inherited the talent for exploitation.

'I'm not going back in there.'

Oliver cocked his head up and smiled. 'You can leave now. Go as far as you like. I've had my fill.'

•

Jennifer talked to herself as she wandered over the curiously unburied graveyard. 'I'm not prepared to work this site until I know who ordered the survey? I was under the impression the contract came directly from the developer.'

Malcolm was following her. 'Does it really matter Jennifer, whether the contract comes from the developer or the owner of the company?'

'It does. I don't want to be caught in the middle of something. It was bad enough last time.'

'What do you mean?'

'Something was off in Green Point. There are unanswered questions. Why, for example, was I there in the first place? I doubt very much that I would have agreed to work the site if there were no slaves buried there.'

'You said you were willing to try. There was such a strong possibility that there would be slave bones.'

'But it turned out there was nothing.'

'Not on that site, a little further along—'

'How convenient.'

'Jennifer, you must be careful what you say.'

'It's too hot, I'm going down to the beach.'

'But your transport to the hotel.'

'I'll find my own way there.'

Richard was just leaving Wiseman's when he spotted the archaeologist. She was standing under a milkwood tree at the edge of the sand. He thought she looked like a big, upright gastropod.

'Oliver, could you have one of your waitresses rummage amongst the lost property box and bring me a hat?'

From a selection of hats and peaks he selected a floppy paper thing which looked like it might accommodate her bandaging.

'Thank you,' she said, when he presented it. 'I was starting to feel dizzy. I desperately want to get to the water but I can't see how it is done here.'

'Follow me,' Richard offered.' He began picking his way through the carpet of sunbathers, flashing a white smile and shaking hands with people he knew, but always progressing, until Jennifer found she had been guided to an open swath, which seemed to extend from one side of the beach to the other. At first she failed to understand how this could be.

'Cigarette *stompies*,' said Richard. 'That's what we call the butts here. The high-tide deposits thousands.'

Jennifer looked more closely. Sure enough, she was walking on white filters.

'I didn't realise so many people smoked lights.'

Jennifer was surprised. She had expected something different from the developer. Not this behaviour which almost passed for charm. She reminded herself she was in a small town now, with different human dynamics, and resolved to be careful in all her assessments. It would be too easy, for example, to react against the prevailing culture of leisure. But already, she felt uncomfortably conscious of her clothes and her white skin, her sweat. She felt a part of what made the beach prosaic—one with the cigarette butts—and her discomfort was only aggravated when they arrived at two bronzed bottoms. Their owners' heads were inclined to a magazine in the shade. 'The struggle continues,' said Richard. One of the heads craned back. A sharp little shoulder blade disappeared into creamy flesh. Both otherworldly creatures were topless.

'On to the sea,' Richard declared mercifully.

When they reached the limit of a gentle tide he said, 'Somebody planted those bones, you know? I'm sure you've noted that already.'

'Who would have done that?'

'I'm not sure.'

'You don't seem too concerned about it.'

'I'm not.'

Without further comment the developer stripped to his black briefs, dived, and dramatically breached fifteen metres away. He swam off, apparently out to sea.

Jennifer continued to dwell on what he had told her. Yes, it seemed there was some foul play on the go. But how had she found her way to the middle of it? How had that happened?

The frustration of her memory loss occupied her so that at first she did not notice the brown man beside her with a smoking red box. 'A lolly to make you jolly sister,' the little man said. Jennifer's physiological eye noticed how his forearms were swollen from carrying the heavy icebox all day. Bunched cords of muscle rolled in them like cables. Her eyes could go beyond the skin and muscle to the unnaturally developed bones of his arms and shoulders. As a result of prolonged and excessive muscular activity there would be rough patches and bone projections at the insertion points of tendons and ligaments. Would she be able to deduce his lifestyle from his skeleton, she wondered? Had his skeleton come down from a certain age she might have concluded that he was a sailor, or even a slave. Given the location and the present time, Jennifer thought she would probably have presumed him a construction site labourer. She declined the invitation to be jolly with a lolly. 'Come sister, I see you're screaming for ice cream. Granadilla is a filler.' The toothless man, the rhyming, the flesh and the sun, all had connived to make Jennifer feel dizzy. Perhaps realising her vulnerability, the salesman snaked his great forearm around her neck, and gently steered her head towards an appraisal of his wares. She could smell wine on his breath. *Now* she wanted to scream. How had she come to be in this absurd place, she asked herself? One minute she had been analysing the bones of a west-african slave the next—

Suddenly it was the beach bum who was in a vice. 'Vinnie, you old dog. What do you have for us today?' The developer, dripping seawater, had the small man in a friendly headlock of his own. 'Just the usual master,' the man cooed, '—a sucker for a mother fucker!'

Under the boulder the two nymphs flicked lollies with little red tongues. Jennifer allowed her ice-stick to melt in her hand.

'Where are you staying?' one asked.

'Some hotel.' Jennifer replied with deliberate vagueness. In fact her mind was racing with stratagems.

'I'd better get going actually,' she announced with sudden decisiveness. Richard jumped up. 'I'll be fine thanks,' she made to remove the hat.

'Keep it,' said Richard. 'I suppose I'll see you tomorrow? I will have gotten to the bottom of our mystery then.'

Jennifer doubted I very much—he had just daubed the girls' nipples with the end of his ice-stick. Their shrieks followed her across the sand.

The playboy didn't matter though. It only mattered that her memory had returned. With the return of missing memories, she was able to develop an independent thesis about the bones on Vista Road. She now remembered seeing the advertisement on the Department billboard. That had been before she overheard the conversation between the mayor, the professor, and Richard's brother. They had intended using her to clear the Green Point site of all slave bones and artefacts. But things hadn't gone according to plan. Her injury had caused a media storm.

She had reached the road, where a line of taxis picked off the days sunbathers, and whisked them away to their lodges and hotels. The belle epoch, she said.

Yes, her injury had placed the conspirators in a predicament. The work on the site had halted. They couldn't get anything by the attentions of the lobby, and they feared what she might say to the media who had wanted her story. Her memory loss had saved them, but they must have realised it would only be temporary.

So, to get her away, Malcolm had fabricated a story about possible evidence of a slave community living on the slopes of a coastal town. The mayor had seen to the interdict. Vernon had offered a room in his father's fancy hotel.

She was in the *epoch* now, walking down the ramp that seemed to take one deep into the cavern. It switched back and headed for the ocean, switched, and headed back into the cave, all the time descending, and at the switch-backs on the side of the ocean there were doors to rooms, only one per level, and hers was at the very bottom. She remembered telling the concierge she felt, 'like Australopithecus hiding from the sabre-toothed tigers' when he first led her down.

She was disturbed in her packing by a cough at the door. 'Vernon, you frightened me.'

'I'm sorry, I should have called. I heard you were in. I was interested to know how your first day went.'

'Not too bad. Your brother had a surprise. He seem to think—'

'Yes, Richard seems to think, but he doesn't really. It's not his thing.'

'Oh, he seemed nice to me.'

'He's perfectly congenial. He would have made a good stripper, don't you think?'

'Well—'

'I'll leave you to unpack.'

'Actually, Vernon, I've decided not to stay. I was thinking of taking a B&B somewhere in the area. Sea Point perhaps. I know Sea Point. I enjoy walking on the promenade there.'

'You needn't explain. *the belle epoch* represents the vision and will of a great architect and builder. These qualities seldom go together to produce results that are comfortable.'

Saying this Vernon turned and left, shutting the door. Jennifer did not see the lock turning slowly around.

13

Daily window cleaning in the belle epoch had always been a sight to behold—a scheduled miracle with its own minor reputation.

Men in white overalls moved over the glass suspended by harnesses, jetting away the ocean rime with powerful hoses. Bill insisted that the water used—the water now sliding down—be treated by reverse osmosis, thereby eliminating the contaminants that cause water spots.

Through the pure, sliding water, the sunlight's full spectrum of colours was refracted onto the empty lounges. Vernon walked through them, between the clusters of chairs and the enormous panes of glass.

A section of the hotel's broad oceanfront was alive, in a way—Bill's collection of chairs, designed by the great modern architects. They were clustered around stackable stools, like fabled creatures plotting a palace coup in wonderland. Around one stool: an egg, a swan, and an ant. Nearby there was a chair with a single armrest, and one with a greatly distended back, in communion with a suspended scroll. Elsewhere: cantilevered zig-zags, a *chaise lounge*, rippling like a beaten carpet.

Red, blue, white, black, orange, yellow. Aalto, van de Rohe, Gray, Breuer, Mathssom, Rietveld, Jacobsen. Bill had added them one by one, attending auctions all over the world, buying originals, when available, for great sums. He knew their stories intimately and once upon a time he had been famous for expounding their origins and inspiration. Now, if anything, his gaze went sadly over various signs of wear and tear: a split leather cushion on the Eames; a missing orange band on the Wassily. A coffee stain on the back of the swan.

All were bathed new on window-washing day—a scene that Bill never missed, even now. Vernon noted the large gas tank propped near the egg, tubes disappearing intravenously beyond its orange curvature. The oxygen hissed from a leak in the tap, as it had for a year or more.

It was not the most ergonomic seat. A year ago, Vernon had added a Paimio lounge chair to the collection, designed by Alvar Aalto to ease the breathing of tuberculosis patients. It had cost him a fortune. He had expressly wanted something more suited to Bill's condition. But no amount of thoughtfulness could eject the old man from his favourite orange orb. He was asleep now in its embrace; mouth clamped shut, his jaw half-shaved. The

electric razor Bill favoured was at rest on a black stacking stool, and would be taken up again later, to complete its mowing.

Vernon took the Paimio and waited. When he looked again Bill was awake, pulling his fingers roughly across his eyes and eyebrows.

'Hmmm' Bill looked out from his egg expectantly, especially from his bad eye.

'Girl,' he grunted.

'Yes.' Vernon explained why Jennifer was staying in the hotel. He did not skip over any detail—he had his father's candour. It was not the plan that Bill had suggested. That plan had failed—it had been wholly unsuited to the new politics of development in the city. You could no longer rely on people in power to get things done. Civil society was alive and kicking.

'This is the only way,' he explained, unconsciously echoing Bill's last words to him. He took care to explain why it had to be Richard. How, when the bones were discovered to be wholly unimportant, things would return to normal. Richard would carry on with his work. He would not lose too much money. Finally he told about the American locked in one of the *epoch's* rooms. It was an issue he felt he could use some advice with.

When he had finished speaking the good side of Bill's mouth turned up and he rocked backwards and forwards in what seemed like silent merriment, and he even seemed to be clapping. This loosened his rotten chest and he began hacking more violently than ever before, and by scribbling in the air—indicating that he wanted the pad and pencil beside his razor—Vernon was led to believe that Bill himself regarded the attack as being singular—and that the words he scribbled would be his last. When the page was written Bill slumped back. Vernon took the pad from him and stared at the note for a long time.

'Is that so,' he said tersely. A vein at his temple spread itself like a river.

The window cleaners were then going up and down with rubber wipers, leaving glistening streaks of soap, which disappeared on the next belay. The view left behind was crystal clear: a calm ocean, only lightly crinkled. Inside the scene was unchanged. Except that Vernon was no longer there, in the Paimio. And neither was the oxygen hissing. The old man stared out from his egg through a single red eye.

14

N'taks found she was arriving at work earlier and earlier. She had started to bring her breakfast too. It was the heat that did it. The meteorologists wouldn't yet admit the peninsula was experiencing a heat wave—the atmosphere had to deliver consecutive days at 35 degrees or more—but there was a strong likelihood, according to the forecasts, that the criteria would soon be met. In the office there was an air-conditioning unit. It was ancient, half-gummed up with city rime, and it probably caused poisoning by pigeon guano, but it cooled the place down.

'What have you brought for breakfast today, city girl?' Woods was much taken with the idea that N'taks, a rural girl from the Transkei, bought yoghurts and muesli's, croissants and muffins, while he persevered with his dark porridge. 'Never feel like anything else,' he bragged; 'same stuff for thirty years.' Recently he had brought in a small hand-bell, which he placed prominently on his desk. It had a thin handle with a Celtic cross at the top (or a four leaf clover) and a tiny fish-sinker for a clapper, welded onto a short chain. 'A bell for summoning the kitchen staff,' he said; 'It belonged to my grandparents. I remember how the cooks took it in turns to rush through in their starched white chefs' uniforms and clear away the breakfast debris. Sometimes I would ring the bell just to hear one of them storming through.'

'And you wanted me to know that?'

'I've always wanted people to know that, for some reason. I put it out on tables and tell the story. Each time I tell myself I should either make up another story, or not put the bell out at all. But I always make the same mistake.'

'Where did your grandparents live?'

'On a farm.'

'Your parents?'

'The farm.'

'Aha.'

'What?'

'That explains a lot.'

'What, exactly?'

'A lot.' N'taks lost her nerve and filled her mouth with a slice of apple. She had sliced and eaten half of a green apple, leaving the other half flesh down on a side plate.

'Are you going to eat the whole apple today?' Woods asked.

'I always do.'

'No you don't. Yesterday you left half an apple on a plate in the fridge. It's still there.'

'I'll eat it.'

'I also found half a banana in the rubbish bag, still with its skin wrapped tight. I suppose you cut the banana in half with a knife, skin and all.'

'That's right.'

'Why would you do that? Could it be possible for a food to have a more perfect packaging than a banana skin?'

'No. That's exactly why I leave the skin on the other half; so that it's fine and fresh the next day.'

'Let me rephrase—there is nothing in nature more obvious than a banana peel. It wants to be peeled whole, all the way down and off.'

N'taks picked up the bell and tried to ring it upside down in her Editor's face, but the sinker fell into the bell's neck and became wedged. She pulled it out with a nail and shook the bell the right way around.

'Boy,' she said, 'please take this man away. I've done with him'

'And when you come back,' rejoined Woods, mimicking her imperial tone, 'please bring that half of a banana that I left in the fridge—it's brown and faecal looking and I may not even eat it.'

'It's all bells at the moment, isn't it?' came a voice from the doorway. N'taks raised her hand to her mouth. For a few seconds the figure's appearance made sense only within the complex system of her peculiar superstitions—was he butcher's son, a medical intern, perhaps even a slash-killer, or all these things simultaneously? Eventually she realised it was the youngster from Wiseman's, smudged with marinara sauce and wearing a blue snood.

'Crispin,' she said. She could never forget that name.

'I somehow felt that Gulliver Shields' suicide did not lack intrigue,' Woods was speaking after they had heard what Crispin had to say. 'He was a retiring sort of guy, separated from his wife (who didn't seem in quite her right mind to me). But he had almost made it to the end of a human life. He was still solvent.'

'Crispin didn't say anything about the causes of Gulliver's suicide,' N'taks corrected. 'You see a Mason behind every bush, you know that? It's as if you have a vendetta running.'

'Of course I have a vendetta against the Mason's. If you knew them the way I do, you would too.'

'That's presumptuous. There must be a reason.'

'Of course there are reasons.'

'What is it?'

'It? Well, I was arrested for vandalism once. It was this great bloody... oh never mind. It doesn't change the fact that they're a bunch of unscrupulous bastards. The name Mason *is* everywhere, always in the same sentence as a scandal involving huge sums of money. It's a swirling bloody smog, it's the choking of the air. To live on the Atlantic seaboard is to know life under the Medici's.'

'Except that they're the Mason's. Look, John, just because they're powerful doesn't mean they are at the root of everything that goes wrong. And anyway, better the devil you know...hey? Life here would be boring without them,' she cajoled. 'Admit it.'

'Not if people are dying!' Woods practically yelled.

The phone rang. 'Fax,' said N'taks, replacing the receiver. Woods had steadied himself.

'I think I'd like to go out there and snoop around a bit—try and find out exactly what it is that they're hiding.'

'Can I come?' asked Crispin.

Woods smiled. 'Of course, I could use some help. In my experience one needs to act as fast as possible to catch these boys at their game.'

N'taks made a clucking noise and began efficiently stuffing the breakfast debris in the bowls that had been used. She disappeared into the kitchenette without a word.

•

Woods pulled the vehicle off into a runnel between the elevated Highway and a series of low, daisy-covered dunes that marched off towards the desert. The dunes would provide the cover for an advance on the perimeter fence.

The editor gave an authoritative cough. 'It's an important coastal biome,' he said; 'but the industrial zone is growing over it at quite a rate. The ecological corridor between the city and the desert is mostly destroyed now.' He faced the rolling dunes. 'At least one can still see what it was like.'

In the other direction pointed hills of gravel had been founded alongside the fence of the Plant, largely obscuring the sheds and machinery in the yard. It

was towards these that Woods and Crispin tacked, picking a way between flowering moguls.

'No sign of a guard,' whispered Woods. 'Wait here until I'm over, then skirt round to the gate. If the guard appears call him over, tell him you're lost, or out of petrol. Keep him preoccupied.' Woods broke from the dunes. At the fence he crouched, rose, and began climbing. He had no sooner disappeared into the pyramids on the other side when Crispin heard a menacing shout, and watched Woods running back out. 'Hide,' he shouted, before flinging himself onto the fence. Crispin ducked out of sight just as a security guard came storming from the mounds, loosening a truncheon from his belt as he ran. He hit Woods's left hand off the mesh. 'Okay okay,' Woods shouted, and dropped to the dusty ground. He jerked his head towards the gate as the guard handcuffed him, a sign to Crispin that their roles had reversed, that Woods was now the one supplying the distraction. He moved around to the front gate, which was shut but not locked. A quick dash across the yard saw him to the dark entrance of a large shed. The air bulging out of it smelled of the farm—cold oil and rats. He shivered, but forced himself to progress further into the gloom, towards a faint outline of light at the end of the shed, an alternative exit, or so he presumed. Outside he could hear the crackling of the guard's radio. Woods was saying, 'this really isn't necessary'.

'Juffrou,' the guard shouted, banging the iron shed door with the handle of his truncheon. The outline of light cracked open and a diminutive figure rustled out of a dimly lit room. Crispin stepped behind the tyres and observed that the figure was wearing the full Muslim dress. She (he presumed) trailed vapours of pinewood. Voices were raised outside, a reassuring coordinate for Crispin, as he padded to the open door and hesitated on the threshold. It was a familiar scene: a room filled with smoke, like a kitchen in which something had burned. Crispin located the source: a steel basin on the central table, over the rim of which a blowtorch nozzle, flickering blue at its end, had been hung. He traced the burning gas backwards down a loop of piping to a large butane canister. The scene made sense to him only in terms of fire risk; fire, passing quickly from box to box on the table, and from the table to the shelves, consuming everything. And yet it might be that the room lacked the combustible material necessary for an inferno. It was impossible for Crispin to tell, since the clutter was of boxes, sacks, vessels; everything covered, ready to be transported. The basin alone was alluringly open to the room, with the blowtorch flame flickering at its edge. By standing on a Hessian sack propped against the near side of

the table, Crispin hoped he might look in. He listened first for the voices outside then moved forward. Under his weight the contents of the bag subsided a little, like a pile of wood might, then tipped over and spilled their contents with a sound of skittles falling. His retreat was too slow. The security guard was waiting in the passage between the implements and tyres, advancing with a fencer's shuffle, his truncheon held high.

'You've got me,' Crispin cried, holding up his hands and smiling.

•

'Gershwin!' yelled a female warden. She folded a clipboard under her gigantic arm. A woolly-haired man rose from the crowded cell-floor and dusted his pants.

'What's your surname?' Woods whispered to Crispin.

'Callais.'

'They seemed to have passed you.'

'You think?'

'The last man out was a G as well. They're moving alphabetically...' Woods stared angrily at the Warden as she locked the gate. 'Always alphabetically. I sometimes think there's a resignation that comes from always being last. We W's experience life differently. We're never reconciled to our patronymics.'

Crispin smiled. He liked this angry old man. There was life in the way that he talked. Removing his shoes, he placed them side by side, and then sat on them.

'Does it help?'

'A little.'

'I'm worried my feet will smell, somehow.'

They had been in the cell for several hours, mostly stealing glances at the other inmates, some of whom muttered to themselves. The only person standing was a large man with a hard shape to his fleshy mouth, whose eyes kept rolling back, so that he showed just whites and looked like he might fall forward at any moment.

A faint cry could be heard down the passageway. 'Chico! Chico!'

A youth in clean clothes sprang up in response and shouted back: 'Amano. Ah-Mhan-no!'

Like mountaineers on separate peaks they shouted back and forth to each other, not seeming to mind if the meaning of their conversation became lost somewhere between.

'Damn,' said Woods. 'I've just remembered about the new vagrancy law. That's why it's so crowded in here. Anyone caught living on the street can be arrested and charged. *Bergies*, street-kids, refugees, prostitutes, drunk students, you name it. They performed a sweep recently. This couldn't have happened to us at a worse time.'

Chico searched in the font of his pants and produced a box of matches and a bent cigarette, which he lit and passed around. Crispin thought it an impressive gesture from someone so young. When it came around he did his best to conceal the cigarette as the rest had done, behind cupped hands. As the damp filter touched his lips he felt instantly infected with their criminality.

'Who thought collective indignity could feel so warm and fraternal?' said Woods. 'You'd think we'd all be rattling the grate and howling?'

Crispin's stomach burbled audibly, perhaps a muscular response to the nicotine.

'Hungry.'

'Hmm.'

They both eyed the toilet—a stainless-steel bowl in the cell corner, set entirely in the ground. There were no partitions, and no paper, except for the sodden tissue overflowing from the bowl. Two white footprints had been painted in front, dictating the appropriate distance from which to urinate.

'That's just the sort of stupid thing that encourages people to mess,' said Woods.

The warden reappeared at the gate with her clipboard. 'Callous!'

'That must be you.'

'Thank god.'

'I'll see you on the outside. Tell N'taks not to worry.' Woods suddenly stood and followed Crispin. 'I forgot to ask, did you see anything in the shed?'

'I'm not sure. A great deal of smoke, and something that could have been—'

'A bone?'

'I couldn't be sure.'

'Tell N'taks.'

Crispin followed the beefy warden to a room in which men had lined up against a wall. As Crispin joined at the end, a box of orange uniforms was dumped on the floor and the line rushed forwards. He told the warden he was

in the wrong place and she kicked the last remaining uniform towards him. It was old, and fell into a hall of balconies stacked in a U-shape, each one serviced by metal stairs running up on the left and right. A number of cells were accessible from these. Crispin was led up to the highest level, level 'D', and along the perforated metal balcony to one of these small caves. In the dim light Crispin saw two bunks (the bottom of which was occupied), a basic sink, and a silver toilet bowl. His brain garnered the wrong message from this last observation, and initiated such force of peristalsis that Crispin barely unpeeled the orange overalls before falling back on the bowl not three feet away from the head of his sleeping cellmate. He sensed that this man was awake (in fact, he saw the eyelashes flutter) and proceeded to pray most fervently. He regarded it as a good omen that the cellmate did not budge during his sojourn. After the desire to laugh in triumph had passed he climbed carefully to the top bunk and pulled a stinking grey blanket over his head in order to shut out the slightly flickering bulb. Already things were biting the backs of his legs.

A middle-aged coloured man was standing beside Crispin noticed that there others strolling passed the open grate, casual as men on their lunch hour.

'What's happening?'

'Breakfast. You must hurry, or yours will be taken.'

Crispin followed his cellmate out. They tramped down the four flights to the concrete floor where two metal tables had been placed together and loaded with sandwich platters and large plastic juice kegs. A fallen sandwich, which had acquired the impression of a boot sole, showed the morning's filling: margarine and polony. Under the supervision of a new warden, each inmate helped himself to two bread triangles and a polystyrene cup. The choices of juice were bright red or bright green. Crispin took his triangles and chose bright red. Then, finding that the stairway provided the only seating, and that the steps were already arranged with inmates to quite a height, he lost his appetite and offered the breakfast to his cellmate.

'How long have you been here?' he asked, moderately reassured after having made the gift. The cellmate flashed the fingers of one hand twice. All too soon the inmates had begun climbing back to their cells.

'Hello officer,' Crispin called; 'I think there has been a mistake. I've become mixed up somehow. My name is Callais?' Realising the meaningless of this statement he tried one slightly less meaningless: 'I work for Oliver Mason, in Blue Bay.'

When the warden did not turn around or answer (but stopped what he was doing, a portent Crispin new well from the farm) Crispin hurried back to D4. A few minutes later the officer came banging the grates. He completed the U of level D and left the silo. Would the same thing happen at lunch, Crispin wondered? And again at dinner? He found it difficult to imagine an alternative arrangement. His cellmate lay down again and pulled his grey blanket to his chin.

'You work for Oliver Mason?'

'I suppose you could say I used to work for him. He fired me.'

His cellmate laughed.

'What?'

'Where you framed?'

'No, I was found trespassing on some Plant belonging to the Mason's. There's this journalist, you see—'

'What were you looking for, exactly?'

Crispin hesitated. He tried to remember what he had overheard.

'I'm not sure. Chinese things.'

Again the cellmate laughed. 'You were looking for ghosts. You were looking for ghosts and their ghost ship! Did you did not find anything?'

Fine, Crispin thought. If his cellmate wanted to gibber he would meet him half way. 'There was a Muslim woman, burning some things. I thought they looked like bones.'

'Was there no wood that she needed to burn a bone?'

'How long have you been here?'

'I'm not crazy.'

The lock on the gate clicked open. Someone was climbing the stairs.

'Callous. You've made bail. Come with me.'

Suddenly the older man was in a hurry to speak. 'Look, my name is Yussuf Aziz. Formerly I was employed by Richard Mason, until he fired me too. I want you to do something please. Find an American called Jennifer Glass—G-L-A-S-S. Tell her I am to be sentenced tomorrow morning. She has to be there. It's my last chance.' Crispin walked out of the cell and then turned, feeling he had forgotten something. 'Go back and find your ghost ship,' the coloured man said. One more time he bellowed with laughter, and lay back on a filthy blanket.

N'taks was waiting for Crispin by the station's front desk. She hugged him, and laughed at his understatements.

'*An interesting experience,* was it? We spent the whole night sick with worry while you were having *an interesting experience*! Well good for you...' They walked arm in arm through the streets.

'Where are we going?'

'To John's guesthouse. I made a mistake, I'm afraid. I wanted for you to stay together (for safety's sake) so I waited for John's name to come up, thinking I could post bail for you both. But by that time you had already been processed, and there was nothing to be done until today, when John mobilised an Inspector friend of his to pull some strings. He's at home now, sleeping it off. I'm afraid you won't have much time to relax. You're both due in court in a couple of hours. The Mason's have decided to press charges.'

15

There were no air-conditioning units in court 2.

'That's criminal,' said Woods. They were all sitting together on the same bench: Woods, N'taks, Crispin. The room was very crowded. Outside the courthouse there had been a throng, mainly of Muslims, and what is usually called a 'security presence'.

'There must be a big something big on today. It's probably gang-related. Just our luck.'

The room was shifty. There were gruff rumblings and tremulous whispers—groundswells, as entire families craned to see which prisoner had just been led up from underneath the courthouse. The temperature rose.

A large figure in a robe passed by and Woods began to rise, but quickly sat again.

'It's swami-Roodt. What's he doing here?'

'It must be something big,' said N'taks, who had conceived a measure of awe for the giant Rastafarian. It seemed he was not welcome, though. Hissing followed him through the court. The orderly began to shift on his feet, nervous perhaps, that he might soon be called to answer to his designation.

To steady his nerves Crispin tried focussing on what was not human in the room: the warped panels of wood surrounding the court—a distortion suggestive of negative pressure, much the way his stomach felt. A remarkable chair made a better object of study. For legs it had intricately carved talons which clutched smooth wooden spheres, like prey taken on the wing. The body of the chair was upholstered in plump green leather with the wood around it polished to a shine. What, Crispin wondered, must it be like to sit in such a chair. Where might it take him? To which old administrations and houses? How stiff and stuffy things must have been.

A small riot of clapping and shouting broke his reverie. A prisoner had been lead out from under the courthouse. He smiled directly at Crispin.

'Yussuf.'

'Do you know him?' asked N'taks.

'He was my cellmate'

Woods made the connection: 'Yussuf Aziz. The man who injured the archaeologist. That's why swami-Roodt is here.'

'Did you speak to him?'

'Yes. He seemed to know about the Sand and Gravel Plant. He said we had been looking for ghosts—a ghost ship. I took him for a crazy man.' Crispin had forgotten about the inmate's request. He had never meant to remember. But neither had he expected to see Yussuf again.

'All rise!' the orderly shouted. Most of the courthouse was already on its feet, obscuring the judge as he approached the bar. It was only when he stopped, and waited for the orderly to properly position the ball and claw chair (it had been placed against the far wall) that one could glimpse a wing of snowy white eyebrow coming off the side of his face. The curls of a grey wig dropped down to his robe, which was red and flowing.

'A relic from before the transition' Woods said. 'Colony to Union, not Apartheid to Democratic Republic.'

When the chair was properly installed the judge lowered himself and a rustling of cloth ensued, a hubbub also, of groans and sighs, as the audience, now restful, followed suit. But before order was completely restored a loud report from the direction of the bar caused people to freeze in odd phases of sitting. All eyes went to the judge, who, despite maintaining a dignified expression, was being served a violent ride by the ball and claw. His stern aspect never altered when, following a precious second of stability, he himself began swaying from side to side, like a metronome, disappearing lower and lower with each movement, faster and faster, as the chair's swivel mechanism began to hungrily devour its own grooves. With a second, final, and much louder crack, the chair and its august occupant dropped an entire foot and whipped around, causing the powdered wig to slip off to the right, and presenting to the courthouse the old man's freckled neck and partly bald head.

Laughter ballooned quickly, filling the court up to its rafters. (swami-Roodt's bark—*whore whore whore*—rising distinct above all others). In the meantime the judge had regained his wig and his rightful position, and was sitting—his eyes closed—with his right hand poised over the his public address box. Silence, when it came, was pure and fearful.

'This is the case of Yussuf Aziz,' the judge said, manoeuvring the syllables beyond his lips like bits of bone and eggshell. The orderly whispered something in his ear. Yussuf looked at Crispin. Again he smiled.

'It is my understanding that there is to be an appeal for leniency from the person whom was allegedly attacked. Would that person also rise?'

Yussuf licked lips. His gaze settled on N'taks. He raised one of his eyebrows. N'taks noticed that the accused was not the only one looking in her

direction. From all corners of courthouse No. 2 she was receiving expressions both imploring and quizzical. The judge himself had dipped one of his broad wings expectantly.

'It seems Miss Jennifer Glass is not with us today, so I am obliged to proceed with the sentencing. Yussuf Aziz, judging from the evidence that has been presented to me I find you guilty of attempted manslaughter, and hereby sentence you to ten years imprisonment without possibility of parole for six.'

'He'll be out in two,' said Woods, getting in before the cries of dismay went out. The prisoner was taken immediately beneath the court. The judge, announcing a ten minute adjournment, swept out the side.

'Poor man,' said N'taks.

'To show pity is felt as a sign of—'

'Oh shut up with your precious philosophy.'

Richard Mason encountered some sort of gathering below the courthouse stairs—Muslims in their cloaks, Fez's and burqa's, though he would later say 'dresses and veils' when describing the scene to Oliver.

As he drew near, after having parked more or less amongst the root system of a ficus, he wondered if they might pose a danger of some sort. Certainly they looked no different to the Muslims one saw on the television, always wailing or shouting mortal anger. He took care to give them a wide berth.

But before he gained the steps he was accosted by one of their number—not a very large figure, and almost certainly a female, but a Muslim nonetheless. She had hold of him before he'd had time to formulate an escape plan.

'My son,' she was crying; 'my son.' She buried her face—what little of it made it through the veil—in his chest. When she looked up her eyes were glassy.

'Oh at last, my son! My son!'

Women had flung themselves at him before (god knows, he thought) but this was one for the books. It was drawing more than its comfortable share of attention as well, and he wondered whether there was a call for physical roughness.

'Your father loved you, you know?

Richard goggled at the woman. It was the most absurd thing he had ever heard. Several seconds passed before he rediscovered his tongue.

'I'm afraid you've mistaken me for someone else.'

'No, no, you don't understand. But of course, how could you? For thirty-two years we hid ourselves. For thirty-two years I've been wearing these clothes, all because of you, my dear son!'

Richard reminded himself that he would never live it down if Woods were to walk away because he had failed to sort out a case of mistaken identity outside the very courthouse doors. Yet the Muslim had guessed his age right. That struck him as odd.

'Here,'—she was fishing in a black handbag—'you need proof, I can see it. Here is a picture of your father (oh where is it?). It broke his heart to see you that night, it really did. He was impossible to be around after that, it drove him out of his mind. Poor man, thirty-two years.'

The photograph she produced showed a remarkably like Gulliver Shields, except he was smiling.

'Gulliver?'

'Yes. And I am Pascale Shields. Before that I was Pascale Mason. My maiden name is Du toit. I am your mother. You are my son.'

Crispin, N'taks and John Woods filed out of court no.2. A no-show from the plaintiff meant that they were walking away unscathed.

'I wonder what happened to Mason? It's not at all like him to miss a free hit.'

'It may be that he's having troubles of his own.'

'How do you mean.'

'While you boys were out on your secret mission, somebody faxed through a copy of a mayoral interdict, addressed to Richard Mason. It must have something to do with that building site of his.'

'But isn't that Richard sitting over there,' Crispin cut in.

'It is, talking with that Muslim woman.'

'She's the one from Sand and Gravel, I'm sure of it.'

'Gulliver's wife!' the journalists said in unison. 'What could he want with her?'

'Excuse me,'—swami-Roodt stepped in front of the trio. He had been behind them for some time, intending to make it seem that he was one of their number. An association with the red-head (who, he felt, had the unapproachable look of an ageing special services operative) was especially desirable, given the atmosphere after the sentencing of Yussuf Aziz.

But he had found that the plaza outside the courthouse was relatively calm, and with his knack for self-preservation doubly proven, swami-Roodt began to relax into a more familiar role.

'Excuse me. I couldn't help but overhear about the interdict. I received a copy as well,' he said. 'A site belonging to Mason Construction—not one under the control of Vernon Mason, was it?'

'No, this one's in Blue Bay. On Vista Road.'

'Oho, that must have the billionaire's in a state of high-excitement. Can you see the scenes: trophy wives having to explain to their brattos about the Femur on the front lawn? And the secateur-wielding frumpies suspecting their iceberg's for taking a corporeal nourishment. It's that rare and beautiful thing, people—history turning up to spoil the magazine-perfect lifestyle's of the super-rich. Where exactly did you say the site was on Vista Road?'

This rhetoric suited Woods' triumphal mood. He was happy to furnish the activist with detail he might have missed. 'At the end, by the cul-de-sac. It's directly next door to Vernon Mason's house. His wife, Dianne Fouche, first alerted me to the presence of bones there.'

'An internecine affair?'

'I suspect so.'

'Your name, Sir?'

'Jonathan Woods. I edit The Atlantic Sun.'

'My dream job,' said swami-Roodt, with a certifiable lack of sarcasm. 'No form of media comes closer to reflecting the true paltriness of our modern lives than the community paper. Through your reporting of the 'events' that people organise (the clean-up ops, the community arts project) it is possible to gauge just how human time is being wasted. And our impulse to improve things, be they flagstones or crime statistics is exposed weekly in all its ongoing inefficaciousness. Our hates and loves are best recorded there too—in the grainy photographs of ballroom dances and building code violations. And in community papers is final proof that we love our children and our dogs more than we realise, and probably more than we should. Ah—'

These words seemed to enter Woods' face through the pores rather than the ears, and to suffuse his body with colour from the chest to the top of the head.

'Meneer editor, I exist between the pages of papers like yours. Tell me, in each of these rags there is always a man (it is almost always a man) who is off his trolley with anger, who blows his lid at the slightest provocation. He casts

his jaundiced eye around the place where he lives and sees things as they truly are. This man alone in media is useful, because he works amongst the very roots of disconsolation, in hidden bank charges and other corporate scams, in noise and emission levels. Are you that man sir?'

Of course it was obvious to swami-Roodt that the red-beard was this man. His ability to identify and dissolve his cynical type was right at the heart of his ability to win effective converts, to get the right kind of people behind him on whatever hobby-horse he happened to be riding at the time. N'taks, impervious in her youth and optimism, saw this quite clearly. It mad her squirm to see how Woods was aflame, how the Rasta had made him drop his eyes and scrape his shoe. Woods started to say, 'Well—' and became tongue-tied. Here, thought N'taks, was final proof of the redundancy of their work. Once and for all, she decided that community reporting was not for her. For weeks they had chased the Mason's on one issue or another, and where had it gotten them? To gossiping with an activist outside a courthouse, having narrowly escaped prosecution themselves! Thankfully the Rastafarian then took his leave. He walked as one who has places to go, people to see, but seemed simultaneously hyper-aware of his surroundings. Like a mau-mau general, N'taks thought. Minus the kashelnikov.

'It's all coming to a head now,' the editor prophesied. 'These are the days before the revolution. I can feel it, somehow. There have been scandals before, I'll admit, but this somehow feels different. The Mason's are coming apart. Their ship has been leaking for years, but now the hull is full. Nice to know we did our part.'

N'taks threw up her hands. 'We've done nothing,' she cried. 'Not since I joined the paper, at any rate. What— we managed to insinuate that some balls of fat leaked through from Oliver Mason's restaurant, but other than that, it's been one cul-de-sac after another. We don't know right from wrong where Mason Construction is concerned. We're no more than barnacles on the side of their so-called ship. If anything's sinking it is thanks of their own ineptitude. Damn.' N'taks went ahead across the plaza.

'What's she so upset about?' asked Crispin. His voice carried a note of despair—their brief a trios had been an agreeable time for him.

Woods sighed. 'She's a frustrated ambition. I've had a number of them come and go. And it's not her culture you see. It's hard to care about something when it's not your culture.'

'Oh.'

'What are you going to do now?'

Crispin shrugged. 'I'll go back to the kitchens,' I suppose.

'Well, you can stay with me if you want. At least until I get bookings. All I ask is that you help with breakfast. I find I've grown sick of it, all of a sudden.'

16

Richard asked Pascale Shields to remain at the far side of the lounge. He had been excessively polite, just in case.

Now he crossed to where he knew his father liked to sit. It was the time of day when the window-washers were belying here and there. The old man was in his ovoid chair, his bad eye transfixed by the work.

There was a crushed page by his feet. Richard straightened it out. What he read there hit him with the force of a punch.

'So it's true,' he said, breathing hard. 'I am not your son.' He paced back and forth, turning the notion around as he went. 'I am not your son. You are not my father. Your wife had an affair with one of your employees, and when you found out, you threatened to kill her, is that how it went?' Richard did not wait for an answer. 'She was forced to flee without her baby boy. But Gulliver couldn't go anywhere, could he? No, he was bound to the company by more than the normal ties. You made a gift he could not refuse—an entire Sand and Gravel Plant, all for himself. He would never have more, not with his limited education. This way you made him to watch from the sidelines while you raised his only son.'

Bill had not flinched throughout this savage expose. Richard took it as final evidence that the man he had considered to be his father had no heart, and ice for blood.

'But he was not a mindless slave, oh no. Gulliver had a secret of his own—the bones from the site of this hotel, the Chinese sailors. That's right, he kept it all, every needle and dime. He was a better man than you. Well that's all over now. You may have killed Gulliver, but I know the truth. I'm going to exhibit you for everything you really are. I'm going to wheel you out in front of the media, I don't care if you die then and there—at least you will die knowing that everything you worked for is coming apart.'

Only then, at the zenith of his denunciation, did Richard notice how the tubes that normally disappeared into Bill's nose were loose, and hanging by the side of his mouth. The oxygen tank, he realised, was not hissing as it should.

'Dad,' he said, reflexively.

But he understood Bill Mason was dead. He looked again at the note in his hand. He turned to face the ocean. There the window-washers were going about their work obliviously. He let his gaze go through them, out to sea, out towards Robben Island, and beyond. Except that one of the men seemed to be

trying to get his attention, flapping what looked like a broad beach hat. He moved closer. The man wiped a section of the window dry and placed the hat against it. There, written on the brim, Richard read the words **Please help!** at the head of an unbelievable note.

'Oh Vernon, what have you done?' he groaned.

•

There comes a point in the gradation of emotional and psychological stress, where the sufferer begins to wander without heed. Vernon Mason had found his way to Vista Road, to his home of wood and glass, which rested so prettily on the boulders, but it had hardly been a conscious decision. He was otherwise rapidly dissociating from his former self.

This transition was first tested when his wife, the former beauty queen Dianne Fouche, yelled, 'What are you doing home? It's the middle of the afternoon?' Vernon Mason found he was quite unable to provide an answer.

The Doberman's growled and sighed at Dianne's feet. They stared up at Vernon through their eyebrows.

'Nice dogs,' he said. Then he happened to remember something about the environment in which he found himself. 'Where are the boys?' he asked.

'Away from here. We can't very well expect them to play sand-pit in the killing fields, can we?'

Vernon gave a snort of laughter. 'The professor assures me they're quite uncomplicated. Old but uncomplicated. Not likely to cause a stir. They're friendly bones, if you will.'

'What on earth are you gibbering about?'

Vernon scratched his stomach. 'I'm thirsty,' he said, walking to the fridge. There he found a jug filled with a dark liquid. It had a magical, earthy taste, so he drank a lot.

'My Kompuchea!' Dianne cried.

'Good stuff.'

'I would like to remind you, Vernon, that you're no longer in the city. I'm afraid that you are not allowed to behave like a Neanderthal here.'

Vernon grabbed his wife around her slender waist and kissed her on her plump lips. 'Mmm,' he said. The dogs whimpered.

'Get out!' Dianne cried. Vernon was already going, at his own pace.

It was very hot out on the tarmac, so Vernon climbed above the building site to a stand of eucalyptus there. The spear-shaped leaves cast as many splinters of light as they did of shade. He decided to carry on.

The drink he had taken seemed to have filled his legs with an unnatural strength, and he sought no compromise with the gradient as he climbed. After crossing both the lower and upper contour paths on the mountain he reached a cliff and started climbing. On a ledge, adrenalin mixing with the aphrodisiac in his blood, Vernon had a vision of his own body buckled amongst the rocks, flesh vanishing from his bones with the speed of time-lapse footage. His mouth felt parched again. He manoeuvred off the ledge and climbed through some bushes at the side, down to the smell of warm mud. After several scoops of foul-tasting water an orange helix on the other side of a small pool caught his attention. He knew all the colours that came out after the rains: the vague blues, furry-silvers, deep-reds, purples... there was even a bush that did tiny pricks of yellow. But these had all baked away in the summer sun. The rocks had risen above the bushes and the bushes had turned the colour of the rocks. The whole landscape was a sepia photograph of its winter itself. But this orange helix (an orange peel, he now saw, peeled expertly in one) together with the rank taste of the water, and the tendrils of algae on the rock-faces... it suggested some ecological dissonance. The stream was moving beneath the yellow and green algae, giving it life. Like a living rotting, Vernon thought, and climbing to the next pool, he half expected to find a body decomposing in the mud. That pool was empty, however, as was the next, but the trickling algae compelled him further up the stream. On both sides the walls of the ravine were deepening beyond all geological account, forming an eerie corridor of rock. Starlings whistled on perches high above, and here and there dark cracks were stuffed with elbowing bats. Vernon was surprised to find one near his foot, clinging with tiny claws to a rock just above the waters' surface. It seemed to be slowly chewing something in its pink mouth. Using two sticks, he stretchered it to a fork in a small tree, where it lay back furling and unfurling its wings as slowly as it had been chewing. The billionaire considered it a good thing he was not superstitious, but neither was he completely at ease. Beyond a huge corner of sheer rock, this sense was well honoured: he faced a terminus of sorts—a high rockface split laterally by a broad cave, above which the words 'Jesus Lives' had been spray painted in white. The stream spread over the rock face, laminating the graffiti. Thereafter it wafted over the cave's mouth like a silver curtain, and trickled in the rocks below. Without the graffiti it

was a perfect place of rock and water. There was another prosaic detail: the unmistakeable ploop of water into tin. As Vernon stood listening a figure appeared on the lip of the cave. Then came a cry from within, unmistakably human though somewhat androgynous, the syllables of the words blurring with the load of volume. Loosening a brown sausage from tattered pants, the man urinated into the stream and disappeared back into the cave. The cry continued, covering the sound of Vernon's approach. Slowly raising his head above the cave lip, he looked around. The near earth was packed hard, shiny. The rest of the cave, as far in as he could see, was carpeted with mountain grasses up to a grid of low stone walls, from which a pair of feet protruded. On the right: an area of flat rocks, make-shift benches and up-turned paint tins, empty of people. He approached the dormitory of stone. In the murk he made out the shape of a book on one of the walls and on top of it the type of clock that folds into its own casement. Squinting, he made out the hands—6.15—and checked the time against that on his phone, taking care to cover the phosphoresce of the screen. 6.15. The top of the book, he now saw, was afforested with torn strips of magazine paper—almost one to a page, it seemed, as if this was the only book ever written and every page was equally important. The scene held extraordinary appeal. Such a simple life, Vernon thought. Such peace. From the cave he could see a chink of ocean, a thin section of town. What were views if one had no peace, he asked himself? Great fatigue came upon him suddenly. He sat down on the straw. In moments he was asleep.

17

Oliver arrived shortly before the coroner's men. He and Richard were talking with their backs to the old man.

'I called Dianne. Vernon's not at home. He walked out some time ago. Leaving her parked in, apparently. She asked if I knew where he kept his spare keys.'

'Heartless bitch. He could be in serious trouble, the way things are going. If the archaeologist reports him to the police— well, that's it for Mason Construction, I don't mind saying it. He'll lose everything—Dianne, the kids...'

'Do you think she will report him?'

'It makes little difference. Kidnapping is only one of a dozen charges she can bring against the company. Apparently he was using her as part of a ploy to remove bones from one of his city sites. The conspiracy went right to the top. Seems Vernon had the mayor and an entire archaeology department on the payroll.'

'That's the sort of racket Bill would have been proud of.'

'Exactly, and the American suspects Vernon planted those bones on my site as a decoy for the lobbies and the media.'

'What a mess.'

On the other side of the lounge the archaeologist was being comforted by a veiled woman.

'Who's that?'

'Gulliver's wife, Pascale.' Richard did not feel it was the time to be declaring his genetic distinction. Pascale, on the other hand, was just then telling her incredible story. She looked across at the man who had caused it all—just then being pulled from the egg chair by two of the coroner's men, and as they covered him up so she removed her veil. Underneath, she had on a pair of cotton trousers and a t-shirt with a floral motif. Her hair was like straw. Her skin, as you'd expect, was in excellent condition, and it was immediately obvious to Jennifer where Richard had gotten his looks. A surge of empathy went through her, and she wept for the two of them.

'She seems pretty rattled,' Oliver observed. 'She'll talk to the authorities for sure. What are we going to do?'

Richard seemed far away. 'Nothing,' he said. 'At least, I think I'll tell her about the artefacts out at Sand and Gravel. She's been attacked, hospitalised,

manipulated, kidnapped, all because Vernon wanted to save Mason Construction a buck. Allowing her to claim the discovery is the least we can do to apologise.'

Oliver could see that there would be no reasoning with his brother. Something had caused him shed his faculty for self-preservation. Vernon, of course, was hopelessly compromised. He saw clearly that he alone would have to seek solutions. If indeed there were any to be found.

'What do you think Bill would have done?' he said, as much to himself as anyone, but loud enough that Richard heard. The question seemed to irritate him. 'Bill's dead,' he stated flatly, and went off in the direction of the two weeping women.

The question remained with Oliver. He had spent his life on the margins of the great company, but that did not necessarily mean that he had been oblivious to its processes. He remembered the scandals. They had been the usual kind: charges of bribery, tax evasion, the string of divorces. In response to each Bill would create an even bigger sensation. Once example was the institution of an annual award for architecture—an enormous cash prize for the most innovative design, and then the funding to realise it. That had garnered Bill a presidential award, and the tax man's voice went down under a great foam of media praise. It worked time and again.

But such smoke screens had to be adequate to the scandal they were meant to obscure, and Oliver realised with a sinking heart that the genius with the ability to solve the present mess had died was now being wheeled through the lobby. He went to the window and started out. There were container ships and frigates at anchor, waiting in open waster for their turn at the loading docks. The unending expanse of water seemed to exist solely for this purpose of buoyancy. Everyone knew the ocean was quite dead.

This pile-up of information inevitably dislodged a memory of something the journalist, John Woods, had said weeks ago, about the dead waters around coastal cities, and how some were sinking ships in the hope that the sea life would return. He was able to picture it then—the shock of explosions ripping through one of the container ships, bow to stern, the spectacle of seeing it go down. It would be nothing short of sensational. Given the right publicity, the entire city would turn out at the view points—the mountain peaks and the beaches, the balconies, the bus tops, the promenades—to wait breathlessly for the big moment, and then to shriek when it came. It would be known to man

that Mason construction cared for the environment. Next to that, a few heritage transgressions would be nothing.

But he would have to move fast. Processes might already be underway to secure the conviction of one, or even both of his brothers. If they weren't, then the news of Bill Mason's death would certainly bring the vultures down. Waving across to the trio on the far side of the lounge (was Richard weeping too?) he made purposefully for the exit.

18

The classifieds for the forthcoming edition of the Atlantic Sun included an advertisement for the post of Junior Reporter. Having little else to report, Woods was able to make it a large one, a full page in fact. As requirements, he wrote that applicants should have a proven ability to sub-edit, speak, and write well, good contacts within the community, and a working knowledge of some computer programme that he himself did not know how to operate. These conditions, he felt, would guard against any future princesses from Lesotho. As a final precaution he translated the advertisement entirely into Afrikaans, only keeping a small, somewhat ironic English note at the bottom: *this appointment will be made in line with the newspapers employment equity plan.*

He had been deeply piqued by his former reporter's attack on the paper's efficacy. Mason Construction *would* dissolve, and it would not be, as N'taks had insisted, a process entirely guided by the brothers' ineptitude. What did she expect—that a community paper had the ability to bring down an empire with a single article? No, that was not how it worked. It was the small snipes—the fat ball expose's, the observance of minor code violations—that white-anted the behemoths. She had no patience, was all. She probably had a future on a national tabloid, performing hack political diagnoses—the kind that a hundred-thousand could read on any given Sunday without caring about a single word. She was gone—good riddance.

But when the fax came through under the letter-head of Mason Construction he couldn't help but wish that N'atks was back with him. Here, finally, was clear evidence of their desperation: a press release in which it was announced that Mason Construction intended sinking a ship called *The Jupiter*, 'for the sake of the marine environment'. Never had a business committed itself to the greater good so disingenuously. N'taks, above all others, would be in a position to mark that. And of course he would do as he always did. He would seek to erode the truth behind the phoney gesture, not with startling revelations, but with the sort of minor details that really meant something. There would no doubt—a transfer so swift—be irregularities in the purchase of the ship. He would hold them to every protocol in existence for the sinking of ships—that the tanks be douched, for example, with steam and strippers. Under his watchful eye the process would be several days less expedient, and millions more expensive than intended. 'That, N'taks,' he said aloud, gathering up his Fiat keys, 'is how the game is played.'

•

Jennifer Glass moved slowly around the cluttered room. No antiquarian's den could be more provocative, she thought. On the near end of the central table there was a basin of ash, with ends of bone at the sides—reminiscent of a dead campfire. 'When Gulliver told me that all of this would be on Richard's head if it were discovered,' Pascale Shields explained; 'I panicked, and tried to get rid of the things for good. They've brought nothing but bad luck you see. I wanted to see them scattered to the wind.'

The archaeologist went slowly through the boxes. She laid the artefacts on the table—coins, china plates, a copper boiler, silver buttons emblazoned with their owners' initials (she ran her fingers over them, as if to read the story of their ownership). There were combs and briar pipes, and then came the graven bell.

'Another bell,' said Richard. 'Is it covered in Chinese?'

'No,' said Jennifer. She had hardly believed the developer's hypothesis about the Chinese sailors. The fleet of the Chinese eunuch, Admiral Zheng He, had travelled widely in the Indian ocean, it was true, but there was no evidence to suggest he had come very far down the East coast of Africa. Certainly not as far as the Atlantic face of the Cape Peninsula. The artefacts on the table immediately discredited the idea. No briar pipe would have been onboard any of the vessels, that was certain. Neither were the Chinese Admirals likely to have worn silver buttons marked with letters from a roman alphabet.

That the artefacts had come from a ship remained a strong possibility. The bell, in fact, seemed to confirm and indeed establish this theory. It was not a very big bell—the clapper was rusted tight—and the words engraved on it were ferrous and difficult to make out.

'Pre...itch,' said Richard, sniggering a little.

'The Prestwich,' his mother corrected. 'She was an eighteenth century clipper, often used for the transportation of slaves from the Malay peninsula to the cape, if memory serves. She was last seen in 1807 by the French fleet off the isle of Ceylon. They gave chase, but she was too fast. It was late to be sailing south. Historians believed she was wrecked by typhoon somewhere off the coast of Madagascar. The bell comes from her fo'c's'le.'

The word did not sound at all Chinese to Richard. 'Are you sure?' he asked.

'It was Gulliver's hobby—his passion really. He spent years discovering everything he could—about the clipper, its cargo, the passengers (he could tell you who those buttons belonged to). One of the few holidays we took was just a front for his excursions to the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, England (I waited outside and ate jellied eel). Then one day he just stopped. It all went in boxes and he never said another word about it, nor would he allow me to raise the subject. I figured he had grown tired of gathering knowledge he would never been able to share. It's all written down somewhere, I'm not exactly—hang on, here we go.' Pascale opened a box and pulled out a representative file. 'There are hundreds of these.'

Jennifer had listened intently to everything that had been said, and when it was clear that widow had finished she spoke. '1807—that was the last year in which any ship with a slave cargo docked in Cape Town. The British had taken control of the city back from the Dutch a year before. It would be another eight years before they would declare it the capital of a crown colony—yet it was already a well-established settlement. It is therefore puzzling to think why survivors of a British shipwreck would hole up in a sea cavern no more than a dozen kilometres from the city. Unless—'

Jennifer started laughing.

'What?' asked Richard.

'Do you remember what I told you the afternoon I pitched at your building site, about the possible origin of the bones?'

'About a community of slaves, hiding out from the law?'

'That's it—it was story concocted by the professor to lure me away from the city. A highly unlikely scenario, but not impossible, since slaves ran away all the time.'

'And you think that his deceptive theory might actually apply after all,' predicted Pascale.

'That's it.'

'But what about the English crew, and the passengers? Surely some of them must have survived. They would have made straight for the town and alerted the garrison.'

'I wouldn't have let them go,' said Richard. 'Not if they were going to rat me out.'

'That's it!' Jennifer cried. 'There must have been a mutiny on board The Prestwich. The slaves must have freed themselves somehow and taken control of the ship.'

'No wonder it crashed,' said Richard.

'I don't think that's quite the term,' said Pascale, laying a maternal hand on her son's shoulder.

'Yes, that might well have been the reason the ship became wrecked.'

Jennifer was practically dancing around table. Everything she touched now, she fitted to this theory, so that it seemed to her audience that it was beyond doubt. Richard, although disappointed about what he took to be the humble origins of the bones, was nevertheless glad then that he had not rolled them with the eight-tonne roller.

19

Oliver Mason and John Woods shared the same premonition, the two men having spent most of their lives on the margins of the great company. But where Woods cheered and sought to hasten its demise Oliver had worked to reverse it. He had found a solution.

In procuring a man made reef for the bay, he had hardly scrimped. *The Jupiter*, an ageing container ship, one of the original Sealand fleet which first crossed to Singapore, had cost him the majority of his inheritance—an unbelievable sum. It was due to sail that very day—a short trip, no more than a few minutes, from the dockyards to Blue Bay, where it would lie at anchor for a time, while the necessary arrangements were made for its sinking. It could not happen soon enough, for Oliver judged the family to be in a bad state—Richard seemed badly rattled by the death of their father and Vernon missing (though Dianne could report that food—and a great deal of alcohol—had gone missing from the house).

He was now approaching the dockyards in Mason 3, his sports car, fast. There was a queue by the boom—some chancer in a green Fiat had gummed things up. Oliver pulled out into the opposing lane and swept through.

Woods spurned the harbour area as a rule—it was on too grand a scale, what with its ships, cranes like magnified baby arms, ancient trawlers raised on blocks. He did not appreciate the near equal division of its parts between function and obsolescence. It made for too much clutter, and an underworld it was impossible to regulate. The endless stacked containers put him in mind of contraband: cocaine and armadillos. Neither did he like the smell—fish eyes and petroleum. Even the flowers growing in the shunting yards smelled briny. It was reclaimed land, he recalled. Somehow you could feel it through your feet.

Woods had therefore not known about the permit, which all vehicles travelling the harbour road were required to display. No amount to story-telling had moved the guard at the boom. 'You can park under the highway and walk,' he said. When Woods made to turn a sportscar, coming up behind him at terrific rate, hooted and swerved passed. Woods had just enough time to glimpse the number plate before it disappeared, engine roaring.

He parked and returned quickly. 'You won't be able to see much,' the guard warned. 'Inside there are just more booms, and nobody will let you in unless you have official business.' Woods walked through nevertheless. 'Be careful,'

the guard shouted. 'Soon the people will be finishing work. Not everyone who works in this place is good. You want to be finished looking around when they come out.'

He had been right on the first point. There wasn't much to see. The docks flickered behind metal stakes. The warehousing was indeed inaccessible behind booms. The bad stink was in the air: the dissolved stock of marine industry reaching over from the water.

Feeling there was a need for haste, Woods stretched his hamstring muscles outside a cold storage unit. A man walking out waved at him. 'Enjoy your run,' he said. Woods set off, the docks flickered. In another time, thought Woods, he might have enjoyed the game of identifying the function of certain things. What was the use, for example, of the army of terracotta triangles stacked together in one yard? In another time he might have stopped to make sense of the work being done by men in hard hats, or the sounds coming from the workshops. He could not deny the stirring of multiple curiosities. As always he felt better, more alive.

More people were on the road. Some waved. One access wasn't boomed so the journalist veered left into a loop of warehouses, above which the prow of an enormous container ship reared. It was called The Jupiter, and age had given its hull variegations of its planet namesake.

Workmen were beginning to walk out in their blue overalls. A military jet went over with a supersonic crack, causing everyone to look up and shout. Mason 3 was nowhere to be seen amongst all this detail. Perhaps, thought Woods, finding the developer (he supposed he would find Vernon, or even Richard, at the bottom of this ruse) no longer mattered. He was drunk on detail: a man in a vest, showing off massive arms; two Japanese sailors wearing aviator glasses, the wind funnelling through great stacks of containers, blasting out clouds of sand—and a man walking in the lee of the stacks, then sprinting across the dusty wind channels.

Woods stopped and pissed behind a palm tree. The buildings were thinning out and the road had begun to angle in at the ocean, which was white-capped. A seemingly endless march of giant concrete shapes that held it back. Woods was contemplating what it was, exactly, which made the scene seem beautiful, when an extreme pain in his right foot caused him to tumble over onto his back. A plank had attached to his shoe, elongating it like a short ski. 'Fuck,' he bellowed, as the pain rushed down his leg. The point of a nail was visible through the tongue of his trainer, where a dark stain was already blooming.

Three figures were appraching down the endless line of the breakwater. Even at a distance, and with the pain making his vision swim, Woods could see that they were walking with a certain attitude, wearing pullovers with the hoods up. The uniform and walk of gangsters, he thought. There was nobody else around—he would make an easy target, like a wounded penguin.

This realisation caused Woods to pull himself between the upturned legs of the first-concrete jack, and through a dark gap formed of its intersection with a higher one. Better to feel foolish, he decided. The pain in his foot made him terribly afraid, as if he'd already been attacked once, and the plank, which he did not have the heart to remove, scraped and hindered his progress through the concrete maze. Outside there were already voices.

'There's blood here,' one said. 'Hey mister, where are you? You ok?'
'We just want to help,' said another, and he may have tittered, Woods could not be sure with the wind so strong. He descended now, to where water splashed up from underneath. One of the men, a boy perhaps, had climbed over the top of the concrete mass to the other side. 'He's not here,' he shouted against the sound of the breaking surf; 'he's hiding.' The next voice came from above. 'Maybe he went to for a swim and the big fishes got him.'

Woods took his phone from his pocket. The call-operators for the emergency numbers, with their limited English, would require him to raise his voice, and that would give the game away. If only he had listened to N'taks when she had told him to keep an electronic file as well. In desperation he opened his wallet, hoping for something—a bank hotline, a restaurant number—anything. The cards that N'taks had rejected were there. He dialled the number. 'I need your help,' he whispered.

•

Finding John Woods was difficult. He had said something about the breakwater, mortal danger— his phone was off when N'taks tried to call him back. Seconds later a typed message came through: 'Can't talk—they may still be out there.'

'Hoot,' suggested a guard, who had climbed in her car at the security boom. He had seen Woods go by.

Another message came through. 'I can hear you. Drive further and look for me inside. I can't move.' N'taks and the guard peered into the dolosse. 'Can

you hear us,' the guard shouted. 'Mister, we're here mister.' There was a delay and the phone beeped once more. 'That you?'

'Yes John,' shouted N'taks.

'I'm here.' N'taks clambered inside and quickly came to where Woods was cowering. His foot was up on a concrete elbow, and blood streamed down his leg into his shorts.

'Are they gone?'

'Who? There's no sign of anyone?'

'There were three of them going up and down, like jackals.'

'John, what on earth were you doing out here in the first place?'

The journalist looked away. 'The Mason's,' he said, 'they—' but N'taks was laughing. John Woods looked at her in surprise, but then he saw the scene something like the way it must really be: his impaled foot with a plank attached; the surf spraying up and wetting the guard between his legs; everybody horribly cramped in the concrete maze—and he began to laugh too.

And when N'taks leant over and hugged him, after the jet streaked over, and he felt her kisses on his face, Woods thought it was possible, the way he was laughing, that he was busy with what Buddhists know to be the ineffable and indescribable state of satori.

20

The day on which Zebulon swami-Roodt led his lobby into Blue Bay was distinguished by blue skies and a high wind that shook the hire bus as it snaked up to the boom on Vista Road. He encountered some trouble there. The guard required that he know one of the residents. swami-Roodt made his usual polemical remarks about white and foreign ownership of land. 'Do not be alarmed,' he explained as the bus continued upwards; 'It will take more than a branch to stop us.'

It was not a full bus. Only the nucleus of *Piss Off* had survived the recent vagrancy sweeps—a much quieter contingent who talked about The resonant silence of slave bones, and The grave in the mind, and who equivocated gently and endlessly. They certainly looked a discouraged outfit, disembarking with their pickets held limply at their sides.

The gale ensured that the pickets remained down, or it simply grabbed up and sent them spinning and bending along the street. A blend of dusts turned eyes red. Moods darkened.

The developer was not there and neither was his labour force. There was nothing to stop the lobbyists from clambering amongst the bones. This freedom, and the absence of any humans to chant at, made the people sombre. Without barricades and official resistance, the lobbyists were inclined to see the bones the way the developers did—hardly discernable from the rock and stone, a transient mess, the sooner cleared the better. One member climbed back on the bus. Gradually they all did, leaving swami-Roodt on the verge. 'Bangbroeke!' he swore, and considered invoking the spirits of the past against their cowardice.

But a movement above the site distracted him. It was not much, a shoulder shifting behind a eucalyptus tree. Occasionally a set of eyes peeped out and then withdrew. swami-Roodt knew a spy when he saw one. For years he had been watched, his calls recorded. His name was apparently on some secret lists, not just national ones. He didn't mind. But now he was significantly piqued by the failure of his demonstration to want an immediate victim. He decided he would climb up the side of the site and surprise the spy, but when he reached the trees he found that his quarry, like a Cheshire cat, had disappeared. The diesel engine carried up the slope as the bus driver performed a three-point turn and hooted. Paying no heed, swami-Roodt narrowed his eyes against the

dust-laden wind. There was movement on the mountain slope. With a determined grunt, he set off in pursuit.

The Rastafarian's bulk and his sweaty sandals hindered his progress. His robe caught on the tough bush, which he cursed. Still, he kept the object of his pursuit remained in view. The person seemed to be following a thin track—more like a game trail than a route for humans, and he seemed to have animals intuitions as well—when he approached what seemed an unbroken band of sheer rock, the spy found a slim ravine to enter.

As the pass narrowed, its walls slicing away the sky, swami-Roodt had to lean in against the channelled mountain wind, and upon becoming tired he wedged himself into the largest of the bat fissures and smoked a cigarette in peace, while the water quivered in pools below. Above the bats creaked and shifted, adapting to the unusual currents of air. When he tossed the burning cigarette end into the darkness, swami-Roodt observed how it had settled at head height on a bank of guano. He exited this nook, and continued up the ravine to what appeared to be some sort of worshipper's cave. There was a ragged man at the edge and the sound of hoarse singing drifting out. As the ragged man turned and lost his balance, commencing a traverse of the cave lip which threatened to lead him over the edge of a significant drop, a smile of recognition crossed the Rastafarian's face. This was no Pentecostal gathering. He knew these people—men and woman so pinched by generations of alcohol abuse that they could hardly take their pants off when they needed to. They were history's cast-off's, the wretched of the earth. They were his people. He stepped out from his cover and approached regally.

'It looks like the mountain is on fire,' said Crispin. He meant this literally, for the smoke drifting down the slope seemed, from the deck of The Jupiter, to be emitting directly from a broad band of rock.

Woods' eyesight was not what it used to be. He took the smudge he saw to be cloud emerging from a mountain ravine.

'A fire in this wind would be devastating.' He observed the direction of flying surf. 'It's a south-wester—south wester's blow for days. In the days when guts were tossed in the gutters it was named the Cape doctor, because it blew the stench and rubbish out to sea.'

His observations were not marked with any interest by the people around, a strange collection of environmentalists, demolition experts, sailors and sweating labourers. He was there with Crispin as an observer for *The Atlantic*

Sun. Earlier he had said, 'It's the realisation of a dream this. The bay will have its reef. Whatever double intentions there might be behind it, it remains a fact that this is a response to pressure, the kind of pressure that people like us can bring with a little dedication. If ever you despair of a major task, Crispin, remember this day, remember how such things are achieved.'

Crispin felt a long distance from the family farm then. When you were with John Woods nothing was absolute, nothing was forever. He was a man who could really change things.

And now he explained that, 'a controlled fire will be started in the fuel tanks to burn away the remainder of the fuel. It might burn for days, but of course it doesn't matter so much if fire takes the ship—it's going to sink anyway.'

'The mountain is on fire,' Crispin repeated.

Woods squinted at the shore, at the growing drift of smoke from the ravine. Then he looked at the near waters, splitting with the force of the wind, and suddenly he became animated. 'That mountain is ready to burn,' he shouted, with an edge of hysteria that the men around him could not reconcile with the size of the puff in the distance. 'This is going to be a big one, mark my words.'

Nobody paid him much heed. Even Crispin felt that his mentor was overreaching himself somewhat. But Woods was insistent. He practically demanded to be told the number of the Fire Department, and when nothing happened he ran off in the direction of the bridge. There he found Oliver and the captain in conversation.

'Radio the Fire Department immediately,' he said; 'tell them the mountain's burning above Blue Bay.'

'Woods,' said Oliver—the purchase of a vessel weighing forty thousand dead weight tons had inclined him to be more abrupt—'I'm growing a little tired of these interventions. I'll have you thrown off if you don't behave yourself.'

'Yes,' cried Woods, 'Yes—do that! I need to get back immediately. And radio the Fire Department. Tell them they need to send two choppers at once. In this wind, the fire will be at the edges of the town in under an hour. There's no fire break around the town you know, only eucalyptus, and if the fire gets amongst them, well—' A flash of inspiration caused him say, 'your brother's house will be the first to go.'

Oliver watched Woods race away down the long container deck. 'He looks as if he's ready to swim back,' said the Captain. 'I'll alert the Fire Department. Better safe than sorry. That's my business.'

Oliver removed his own phone. 'Richard,' he said, 'you need to get to Vista Road as soon as possible—'

At first swami-Roodt saw nothing in the gloom of the cave, but instead smelled the stink of wood smoke, alcohol and urine. When his eyes focussed he saw an area, to his right, where people were sitting on make-shift benches and upturned paint tins. Nobody seemed to take any notice of his him, even when he drew closer and shouted. 'Vernon, is that you?'

The billionaire developer was sitting on a flat rock, lower than the others. His face was filthy, his clothes were tattered, and he had a fat green bottle clamped between his feet, but it was unmistakeably Vernon Mason there, in the cave. An old crone to his right was the first to really *see* swami-Roodt. It was a dramatic acknowledgement—her eyes opened wide, so much so that her forehead crinkled. She sucked her bottom lip, and then the top one, and thus lubricated, yelled the word 'Poes!' in a voice of gravel.

swami-Roodt gave a laugh of great affection. 'But of course,' he thought, 'they're all pissed'. He laughed harder still when the crone raised herself from her bench and began tilting up and down, working her lungs like a bellows, pumping expletives (all recognisable and much loved) in his direction.

The performance now had its first effect. A pair of feet protruding from a nearby cubicle of stone stirred and drew in. Two arms appeared out of the top and levered a body from the gloom. This figure staggered across the cave to where his fellows were seated, and hit the crone so that she tumbled back over a paint tin, an action that stimulated cries of outrage from some others, Vernon amongst them. But when the crone made her feet again it was simply to renew her attack on swami-Roodt—a feat of single-mindedness that caused the activist to feel unsettled for the first time. And the other cave-dwellers were responding. The woman-beater seemed to see his victim's point, whatever it was, and fired a verbal volley of his own. Zebulon looked around—there were bottles, stones, who knows what other weapons hidden in the dark. He turned and fled.

'The type of coastal brush that covers the mountainside above Blue Bay is engineered to burn violently once in a while. It is dense and knotty, and when portions die they are held in the grip of living wood as in a grate. At the end of a cycle dead wood will be banked up almost to the height of the living bushes, which are highly combustible anyway, especially when the south-wester blows

over.' Woods, despite his excitement, offered this thorough lesson to his new protégé, as they slapped back to the beach in a dinghy.

'The Cape doctor,' Crispin shouted over the engine's roar.

A fireman was waiting for the dinghy on the beach.

'John Woods?'

'Yes.'

'We require somebody in the air who can co-ordinate the movements of our vehicles and personnel—somebody who knows the road names and landmarks. The person who radioed through said you might be able to help.'

'I'll do it,' said Woods.

Two dual-rotor helicopters came in over the saddle as Richard climbed towards Vista Road. A bus was parked in front of his site, and there were people above it, amongst the eucalyptus. Ash was snowing amongst through the tree-tops when he joined them, and the wind carried thin black snakes through his legs. 'Off,' the developer shouted, judging from this the direction and speed of the blaze. 'Everybody off.'

'Bastards,' swami-Roodt yelled, as stones clattered around him. He had launched into a thin traverse. Ahead, he could see how the path tuned a sharp corner—another ravine, into which he scrambled, and hunching beneath an overhang there, he listened to hear if he was being pursued. There was a sound—the sound of rock against rock, he thought. He climbed a little way down the ravine to where he was afforded a clearer view of the slopes. There he encountered the fire. It moved, not in the conventional chewing line, but in all directions at once as if there air itself was flammable. A branch came his way. 'Like an enormous red combine harvester', swami-Roodt thought, 'throwing out chaff, stones and smoke as it goes'.

Within seconds of boarding the helicopter Woods saw water cascading from the fire bucket, down along the towns' Eastern flank. The pilot explained it was as dire an emergency as he had ever had to respond to. The fire would be at the edge of the town before he returned with a second load.

A flashing cavalcade of engines and trucks was only now climbing to the relevant cul-de-sacs. Woods heard a voice in his headgear, from the chief of operations: 'the engines are on their way up. Which road is in most danger, over.'

'Three parallel roads in immediate danger, all leading off the same feeder,' said the pilot. 'Call them upper, middle and lower road. Middle road presently in greatest danger. Out.'

Woods was not sure that this was right. Even now the fire seemed to be angling up at Vista, the road that was Upper in the emergency parlance. But he shouted, 'Pentreath, middle road is called Pentreath,' and the pilot said, 'middle road is Pentreath, over,' before dropping a second load into the fire itself. As they went down again the engines were turning in. The second chopper roared passed.

Richard made a basic calculation about the speed of the fire, picked up a metal rod from his site, and resolved to threaten those lobbyists who had not yet boarded their bus. It was not necessary; the fire was making more commanding overtures, in the way of airborne sparks sweeping overhead on the wind. Already the roof of one house was alight, several houses down from where the inferno was rearing behind Chattering Stones, on the other side of the rock spill. A jet of water arced onto the burning roof from Pentreath, much of it sweeping away in the wind, which was hot now. Richard was climbing into his own vehicle when a silver Mercedes swept passed, flashing the irony of its moniker and slogan as it swerved: *benefit without the burn.*

'My boys,' Dianne screamed out the window; 'my boys are at home,' before continuing on to the cul-de-sac. Richard ran after her.

Chattering Stones was hardly visible on its perch of rock. Fiery chaff was falling on the roof and amongst the cycads of the rockery, and the wind was hoarse when Dianne disappeared into the house. At the door Richard shouted, 'cover your mouth for god sakes, or you'll need saving too.' She was going between the rooms leading off the passage, shouting her mind out. Richard looked fearfully around at the wooden chamber, at the wood upon wood, and decided he would drag Dianne out. But just then she came down the passageway with a Doberman in each arm, and again continued passed him and out the door.

Incredulity caused Richard to pause for a fateful second. Before he turned to follow, the roof split and a tonne of water knocked him flat.

21

Oliver's first task as head of the Mason line (at the very end of the line, in all probability) was to consolidate the various properties along the coast and in the city, and to negotiate the company's withdrawal from all construction contracts. The sale of certain properties had given him an idea. It had not even been his idea. He had seen a lot of Dianne Fouche in the past months, at *the belle epoch*, where they were both staying after the fire. Early on she had foretold the death of the construction spree. 'Development is going to level out in the next ten years or so. But there's plenty of money yet to be made on the property market. Prices are soaring everywhere. Companies who position themselves correctly stand to make a lot of money.'

The creation of *Mason and Fouche Property Group* solved certain difficult problems regarding the distribution of the Mason fortune, and with former Miss South Africa Dianne Fouche as the thinly smiling face of every advertisement, be it billboard, broadcast or brochure, the profit margins were set to equal and even eclipse those from Bill Mason's heyday.

There had been other challenges. Before the helicopter released the fateful bucket load, Richard had revealed the secret of the bones to the American archaeologist. Exposure was inevitable. Lawsuits were expected. The archaeologist, however, had surprised everyone. She was willing to negotiate, she said. There were certain things that she wanted, and then Mason Construction, as it was still called then, could do what *it* wanted.

Her first condition was incredibly steep: nothing less than Mason Construction's support for her campaign to have Yussuf Aziz released from prison. By way of reparation, Mason Construction should then grant him the means to form his own construction company, and a first contract to build a Museum of Slave Life on Vernon's site in Green Point.

Some positives resulted, however. Oliver had been obliged to contact Mayor Goody, and in this way he learnt of the symbiosis that had existed between the Mason's and the highest office in the city. She explained how the concessions would be in everyone's best interests. Oliver had also discovered the bequest earmarked for the archaeology faculty at the Cape Technical University, and found it was no problem to change the beneficiary.

Finally, there had been the problem of what to do with the remains of both his late father and his dear brother. There was no chance of honouring Bill's wish to be interred in a certain part of *the belle epoch*, like some sort of vampire—the media was waiting on such hypocrisies. No, Oliver desired to further truck with bones. Again, Dianne had

offered guidance—cremation, she felt, was obligatory, and in the matter of the disposal of the ashes she displayed great imagination, suggesting that, 'their remains be packed in distress flares, so that one day they might be instrumental in the rescue of lives on desolate mountain ranges, or hundreds of kilometres out to sea'. But Oliver realised that he was ever so slightly superstitious. One heard of strange things happening at sea—souls finding no rest and so on. And while Richard had certainly proven his mettle, wouldn't it be a cheek to commit their unscrupulous old dad to an afterlife altogether uncharacteristic?

A resolution was further delayed by the fantastic story of Pascale Shields. This woman had emerged from thin air to claim she was Richard's mother. The company lawyers had advised Oliver to issue a refutal—she was almost certainly a gold-digger in search of a share in the Mason fortune. A message had come back, however, that she was willing to take a DNA test. Moreover, she claimed she was not interested in a cent earned by Bill Mason. Her only wish was to see her husband and son buried together.

That made for three bodies requiring disposal, and a series of rather emotional meetings and reappraisals of personal history.

The solution, when it came, came from an unexpected source—nobody less than Pascale Shields' biographer. This young woman had expressed a strong desire to record Pascale's story. It would serve, she said, as the axis of a free-ranging investigation into the lives of the Mason's. She intended the book as a meditation on both the city's past and its present. Pascale had warmed to the aspiring author, not least because she radiated the happiness of an advanced pregnancy. In no great time she came to rely on N'taks to act as an intermediary in such emotional matters as that of Richard's burial. Thus, in an unprecedented way, the former reporter was able to take control over the ending of her book. And she knew just how it should end.

'What about letting them go down with *The Jupiter*?'

N'taks pointed out, as sensitively as she could, that Gulliver had desired the sea for a grave. To Oliver she explained that a tomb of such proportions went beyond even the conception of pharaohs—it would certainly satisfy the grand ego of Bill Mason. To both she put it that Richard Mason's imperfect but undeniable desire to do good would be well served by the project's intentions (not going quite as far as to point out that the remains of all three would nourish the sea life, were it to return).

'Your plan has everything,' Woods told her after the scheme was unilaterally accepted; 'sombreness and farce in equal measure. The grand, the original, the ecological— a perfect work of synthesis.' As a further symbolic step he urged her consider Richard's urn for the prow, Bill's for the bridge (of course) and Gulliver's at the

stern, 'the way it must have been for him all his life—a view from the back of something enormous, complete lack of control.'

When the day arrived there was the problem of choosing a vantage from which to view it all: ocean, ship, beaches, town, the epoch itself—all would need to be described at the last.

Crispin had suggested the beach, but John had shouted him down. 'It will be a pick-pocketer's paradise on the day they sink that ship.'

And indeed, on the day, it seemed like the entire city had turned out, packing the beach and the boulders, forcing the resident cormorant colony to circulate above in long-necked distress. The ship had been entirely encircled by luxury yachts and boats, moored at a safe distance. On one of them was mayor Goody, apparently preparing to fire the flare that would indicate to the demolition experts that the time had come. Political analysts predicted that her support for this and other schemes, like the founding of a slave museum in Green Point, had already sealed her victory in the mayoral elections to be held later that year.

'We'll be able to see everything from the mountain,' Woods had suggested.

'But the baby,' Crispin warned. He had become protective over N'taks in the months during which they had all lived together. Although he was now living in the backpacker's lodge (between N'taks and Woods they had bought the dilapidated lodge and charged Crispin with its rehabilitation) he was still invited over regularly.

'The baby will be fine. It's her mother I'm worried about.' He had bestowed upon his partner an adoring smile.

His decision had been the right one, of course. A lifetime of observation had qualified him to make it.

It did not matter that the á trios missed the three explosions, being in a gully at the time. They beat as powerfully on their chests as on any, and they did manage to glimpse the bow before it slipped under (N'taks running along the path, Crispin watching her feet like a mother). Then, inevitably, the unscheduled flares went up and yacht horns boomed. They watched from a bench beneath a small cluster of scorched pines.

'Some of the trees have been marked with numbers,' Crispin observed.

'Only those that might regenerate,' John explained. 'the rest will be felled and pulled sideways across the slopes. There's a very real danger of mudslides with winter coming on. The erosion could be terrible, and it would bog up the bay, rendering this entire palaver'—he waved at the distant roiling waters—'completely futile.'

'The extinct plants making the sea life extinct?' said N'taks.

'At any rate,' John continued, 'the pines are alien. At some point they would have to go—'

'All this bluster about aliens in these parts. I'm sorry, but as indisputable as your ecological arguments may be, I'll never be able to agree with you.'

'Here we go again,' said Crispin. The lovers carried on.

A junkyard of objects had been exposed by the fire: drums, pieces of corrugated iron, bottles, litter—which seemed to aggravate Woods almost as much as the biological loss. Some birds had returned, faithful doves that, having nowhere particularly to alight, flew from black ground to black ground, like homeowners intending to show the exact extent of the damage.

'I remember watching the fire that night from the saddle,' N'taks said peaceably. 'The blaze was raging all around the town as well as in it, at points where the sparks had found combustible roofs and compost heaps, so that it looked like a dark, disarticulated star had fallen. I thought the whole town would go. And to think you spent the whole night in that helicopter, working to save the town you never had a good word for. I'll never forget that.'

Presently scuffling was heard in some scorched bushes nearby. A pair of adult guinea fowl broke cover, followed by their striped brood.

'Guineas with chicks,' Crispin cried in delight.

'Keets,' John corrected; 'they're called keets—properly, that is.'