asylum story

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

Signature:_____ Date:_____

Abstract

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asylum story is a short literary novel set in South Africa in the year 2019. The protagonist is infected with a deadly new respiratory disease and being held in a quarantine facility near a fictional town in the Karoo. The novel spans a six-month period during which the protagonist becomes involved in an ultimately failed attempt to escape.

The novel is partly inspired by the Department of Health's decision in 2007 to place patients with drug-resistant strains of tuberculosis into quarantine. Many patients died in this enforced captivity. Conditions in some facilities were reportedly very poor and in 2008 there was a high-profile escape from the Jose Pearson quarantine facility.

Though the disease in the novel is not drug-resistant tuberculosis, it is something similar, and the response to the fictional disease is comparable in some ways to the real-life medical response to the TB scare. The novel is set in a universe that is similar but different to our own, allowing the exploration of universal themes without the constraint of a rigid representation of current reality.

On one level, the novel aims to explore issues of institutionalisation and the social response to disease. The hospital as an entity and the character of Dr. Von Hansmeyer are the most obvious manifestations of authority, while the breakdown of social structure in the hospital is both a result of the disease and of the social response to the disease. In this sociological sense, *asylum story* can broadly be placed in the tradition of Albert Camus's *The Plague*.

On the other hand, the novel aims to give a subjective/existentialist account of the experience of terminal illness. In this regard, the setting and social context give ample opportunity to explore ideas concerning mortality, disillusionment, the struggle for meaning, and the nature of human relationships.

The disease may also be read as a metaphor for the human condition more generally. Rather than focusing on any single grand metaphor, however, the writing focuses on the intersection of various ideas and metaphors, framed by the central themes of captivity and disease.

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asylum story

By Marcus Low

The Current

These fish have no eyes

these silver fish that come to me in dreams,

scattering their row and milt

in the pockets of my brain.

But there's one that comes—

heavy, scarred, silent like the rest,

that simply holds against the current,

closing its dark mouth against

the current, closing and opening

as it holds to the current.

Raymond Carver

I learnt to write poetry in captivity. I wonder if that is the only way. Maybe poetry has to be a raging against some form of captivity – even if it is all in the mind.

It could very easily not have happened, though. Soon after the incident with the blood, a young head-shrinker girl with red hair and a large, perfectly-shaped nose arrived and told me to write about my feelings. I think I snorted when she said it.

But what do you do when you have all the time in the world and no time at all? If you are going to sit staring out the window, you might as well write down what you see.

So, sitting on my chair by the ward window, I took out the notebook and pencil she had brought me. And to the sounds of my fellow inmates coughing themselves to death and the redness of the setting sun, I started writing.

And, as if some ghostly apparition had moved my hand, I looked down, and saw that I had written "Sarah" . . . oh Sarah, winking at me from another world, Sarah, smiling in your stupid ignorance. Sarah, still capable of stirring guilt and melodrama in my ruined heart.

One word, and already the past had sprung up like one of those deadly snakes that slithered in the dry earth beyond the fences. Just like the redhead said, it will stir up things you didn't know you had in you.

Just then I started coughing.

And, as much of a nightmare as the incessant coughing is, one does get used to it. It even becomes a friend of sorts. As if you can cough out the past, cough up everything you've done, all your memories, and get it out of you.

Until, one day when it is all out, you have nothing left to do but turn into one of those serene corpses the staff are so careful to clear out as soon as possible.

I decided to forget about Sarah. I certainly wasn't up to dealing with all that yet. So, I turned the page and stared out at the parking lot with the hard, red Karoo earth

beyond it, the scattered assortment of throwaway plants being tugged at by a wind that I knew to be cold and sandy – even though I was indoors.

A path wound down from the direction of the highway, which was out of sight beyond a rocky ridge. Halfway toward where the ridge met the sky was the tall wire fence that was supposed to keep us in.

I didn't write any more that evening – one word was enough. Instead, I sat and stared at the world beyond the fence and tried to imagine what it would be like to walk up that path, out across the ridge, and then to stand out next to the highway holding out my thumb for a ride.

When I went to sleep, though, I dreamt of Sarah. It was the first time in years.

When I came to, there were three masked faces hovering above me. What struck me was how disinterested they all seemed. There was a dull "what's up with this one" look in their eyes. I looked past them, hoping to see angels or gods cracking the pale sky open and swooping down to come pick me up for judgement. There was nothing, though.

Two of the masks helped me up and took me up to my ward, my arms slung over their shoulders. There were some questions about why I passed out. I couldn't answer them, though. It was all a blank to me. Besides, I was feeling groggy and didn't want to talk. What does it matter, anyway, what happened?

Back in the ward I was given an injection of what I hoped was morphine and fell asleep immediately. When I woke up, late afternoon sunbeams were drifting through the window. Von Hansmeyer was standing next to the bed peering down at me. "What happened to you, Barry?" he asked.

Unlike the others, Doctor Von Hansmeyer did not wear a mask. And nobody had ever got the courage together to ask him why. Still, his cheeks looked as healthy as ever, and except for his thinning hair, he could still have been a man of thirty.

"I don't know what happened," I said.

He looked me over quizzically, as if I was some strange specimen laid out in a museum. After a shake of the head he looked me in the eyes and said, "Get yourself cleaned up and come see me in my office in ten minutes."

When I got up, a shaft of pain shot through my head. I felt shaky. I hobbled to the bathroom and considered taking a shower. But there wasn't enough time, so I decided to only wash my face. As I looked into the mirror, I saw large streaks of blood on my cheek and on my shirt. I wasn't sure where they had come from.

I washed off what I could. Apart from my head, there was no pain. I couldn't find a wound either. Somehow all of this didn't really surprise me. As I say, I had a piercing headache, so I wasn't in the mood to think things over. Whatever happened, happened.

For all I know I could have coughed it out. I hadn’t ever coughed blood that way, but I’ve seen others do it, bending over and coughing out lumps of blood thick as wads of phlegm.

When I got to Von Hansmeyer's office he was sitting behind his desk filling in a form, a pair of small, round spectacles perched on his nose. From behind him, the last orange rays of sunlight streamed into the room.

"Close the door behind you," he said, and took off his glasses. The ensuing silence was almost perfect. It was hard to believe we were in a hospital in the Karoo. It could so easily have been a doctor's office in Sandton, for all I knew.

"Let's get down to business then," he said and looked me in the eyes.

"Do you want to die, Barry?"

I shook my head, but to be honest, I might well have wanted to. I didn't care about much just then.

"They found you passed out next to the front entrance. You must have jumped from the second-floor balcony. Do you remember anything about that?"

"No, I don't think so," I said.

"If you want to die, maybe I can understand that. You see people come in here, some never leave or when they do leave, they are dead. You know this and I know this Barry. But some do beat it and go back to normal lives. You have no reason to believe you are not one of these."

"But how do I know I'm not one of the others?" I said.

He looked at me with his head slightly tilted, as if he was seriously considering my words.

"There is a therapist in town, a Miss Van Vuuren, I'll get her to come see you tomorrow. Is that in order?"

"Sounds alright," I said and started getting up. "Will that be all?"

"Yes," he said and put his glasses back on.

I went for a shower to wash off the blood. It turned out my wounds weren't that bad after all. I had a cut above my left eye and some bruising on my cheek. My jaw felt as if it had moved a half an inch to the right, but I figured that was just the bruising making my face feel out of kilter.

I decided that I didn't really get hurt very badly at all, and despite what I liked to tell myself was a morphine-induced grogginess – I'm sure it wasn't really morphine, though – I went down to the mess hall when the evening bell rang. I sat eating with the usual gang, which was JD, Meintjies and McKenzie. They were discussing some controversial thing the president of China had said about nuclear weapons. They were always talking politics, which was strange to me, since politics belonged in the outside world, which was as good as dead to me. I didn't mind listening to them, though.

For dinner we had water-thin pea soup and thick slices of bread that seemed to be a few days old. My jaw hurt when I tried to chew, so I gave it up. I wasn't that hungry anyway.

"What happened to you then, Barry? I heard they found you passed out out front," McKenzie asked, pulling closer my abandoned tray to help himself to the bread I hadn't eaten.

"The gangs must have gotten me," I said.

The three of them laughed and McKenzie said that I should watch out, next thing I knew they'd be trying to make me their bitch. He clearly thought his joke was very funny.

They'd been practising their wit at our table for some time over the pathetic gang war that was brewing in the hospital. And, even though they had been joking, it all

seemed more exciting back then, as if the most gruesome acts of violence was waiting just round the corner. It was, of course, but not in the ways we imagined.

It all started a few weeks before with the arrival of a lanky young man called Tumani, or Tumi, as he was later called. I had been looking from my ward window the day a Department of Health minibus dropped him and three other new patients out front. As he walked stooping across the parking lot that day, something about the reptilian way he kept glancing about him told me he was trouble.

I met him a day or two later in the bathroom. I said, "Hello," and he just stared at my arm with a dull look in his eyes and said nothing. It was then that I saw the tattoo on his slender shoulder. By now, the rumours of his jail time had spread through the hospital. Not that it was strange for us to have ex-cons – I wouldn't be surprised if one in every four had had occasion to stretch his limbs in a prison cell; it was just that there was something different about him. He was quiet and aloof in a way that made your hair stand on end.

Tumi was a Senegalese immigrant. There was a rumour that his dad was killed in that first spate of xenophobic attacks some ten years before. I never believed that, though. Stories had a way of changing in the hospital. Either way, he soon had something of a following among the other patients with immigrant roots.

Then one day in the mess hall someone apparently said "ikwerekwere" – I wasn't close enough to hear it myself. Tumi walked over to the table where Mazza and Sibu were sitting, and stood there looking at Mazza, not saying anything. At that a silence fell over the mess hall. Mazza got up and said in Xhosa, "Can I help you, brother?"

Tumi just stared at him, his thin, muscular arms shaking with a barely perceptible rage. He turned around and walked out slowly. Five or six others got up and left with him. There was a confused silence in the room. I don't think anyone knew what had just happened.

When the “ikwerekwere” story started doing the rounds, everyone at Mazza and Sibu’s table denied that they had said any such thing. Of course I couldn’t say, but I always thought it quite plausible that they did actually say it. It was just the kind of fooling about they usually got into. Whatever the case may have been, though, the battle lines were drawn.

Mazza and Sibu had for some time been the alpha males of our sad community of a hundred-odd stiffs. Not that they ever fought anyone or anything like that; they just looked and acted the part. And given the fact that we were all sick, there wasn’t much point to putting up a fight. If they wanted to play hot shot, let them.

With Tumi around, though, everything had changed. Even as McKenzie cracked his joke about the gangs making me their bitch, the rival groups were sitting on opposite sides of the mess hall doing their best to ignore each other. They may have been joking, but there was a new kind of tension in the air. Sooner or later something was going to give.

Me, I didn’t give a damn, though.

After dinner I stood in line for my pills. They had a counter and a list of names and what pills you were supposed to get. They ticked your name off as they watched you swallow. When it was my turn, I flung the two pills into my mouth and drank down a large, full plastic cup of water.

The broad-shouldered male nurse with the freckled face who was standing behind the counter looked at me as if I had just broken some unspeakable social taboo. “That’s your problem, buster,” I thought. I wondered if he knew about the injection I had had earlier and whether I should still be getting my pills. But I never liked talking to him, so I kept quiet.

Besides, I don’t mind so much, being kept drugged up.

As I turned to leave, though, he cleared his throat and said, “No! Lets see.”

I turned back and opened my mouth.

"Tongue," he said and leaned over for what seemed to be a very long time. I wiggled my tongue and thought of asking him whether my jaw seemed displaced to him, but I didn't.

"Okay," he growled and let me go.

He seemed to be disappointed in himself for not finding a pill hidden underneath my tongue, as if it was somehow his fault that I didn't break the rules and let myself get caught.

At one of his trainings, Von Hansmeyer had said we had to take the drugs to prevent further drug resistance from developing. A community of infected persons, like ours, was perfect for cross-infection and the breeding of new, even more dangerous strains of the bug. If such new strains should develop and be transmitted back to the outside, things would get even worse than they already were. Or, at least, that's what he said.

Of course, everyone was bored, the nurses were working for a third-rate salary, the patients were held against their will and the whole mess was going down in the middle of nowhere. I guess it is not surprising, then, that getting you to swallow your pills had become a power thing for the nurses. No-one gave a damn about resistance.

Many of the patients believed that we were being drugged to keep us passive. Actually, I believed this myself. The blue pill to fight the bug, the red to keep us from breaking down the fences and attacking the nearest town like a herd of zombies. Whether that was the intention or not, though, I always felt a deep, sandy drowsiness overpowering me about a half an hour after taking my pills.

That night, though, I wasn't curling up in bed a half an hour later, but hunched over the toilet vomiting the sludge I had had for dinner. I put it down to a drug interaction and cursed myself for not speaking up about the injection. I guess some foolish part of

me still liked to believe that I was in the kind of hospital where this kind of thing would be picked up by some streamlined modern computer system. So much for the ruling party's grand plans with National Health Insurance.

Miss van Vuuren had a way of looking like she was peering over the rims of her glasses, but without actually doing it. It was an optical illusion that sometimes made talking to her an odd experience, the kind of thing that will get your thoughts trailing off into musings about depth and perspective and things like parallax errors. Parallax errors: Now there's a term you get from spending too much time in a poorly stocked hospital library. Eventually I figured out that the illusion had to do with the size of her nose – which, though large, was extremely well shaped.

"So I guess you know why I came to see you?" she asked. She had a voice like thick honey laced with echoes of an abandoned smoking habit. Way to sweet for the likes of me. I wondered if she had any idea what she was getting into.

"You came because Von Hansmeyer asked you," I said.

"Yes, and because you apparently tried to kill yourself."

"So they say."

"Aren't you sure, Barry?" I didn't like her calling me by my first name. It seemed too intimate. We had just met and already she was prying.

"No," I said, "I'm pretty sure. Although I could just have fallen, or someone could have pushed me. I can't really remember. But, given what a dead-end hell-hole I'm in, I might well have jumped. Not that it matters. Either way, there's not much point in analysing me. I'll be moving on soon anyway."

"Aren't you afraid of dying?"

"As I lay there, my head cracked, I wished for the gods to come take me. This Purgatory thing we got going here gets old quickly. I'll take fire and brimstone judgment any time. Bring it on."

She asked if I had always felt that way and I said that I couldn't remember feeling any different.

Actually, come to think of it, there was no way for me to have seen her nose back then, since she must have been wearing a mask. Still, the memory of her face at that first meeting seems so terribly real to me. Could my mind have added it later, edited it in like a scene in a movie? I suppose it could well have.

Still, in that first meeting in the dusty unused office next to von Hansmeyer's she smiled a lot with those neatly painted lips of hers . . . probably also behind a mask. She'd turn her head and her red hair would drop down and just barely touch her shoulder. She was so friendly and sincere I almost felt bad for not caring more about myself…or anything else, for that matter.

I didn't really feel bad, though.

She nodded her head and looked at me as if wanting to extract something from me by will-power alone. We sat like that for a long time in silence. Suddenly I didn't have the life inside me to respond to her. I had already said more than I wanted to. There is little point, or deliverance, in dredging up dirt when you are on death row. At least, that's what I thought then. Maybe I still think it.

Even when I thought of making an effort, I'd find myself losing my way somewhere between that odd collapse between her glasses and her eyes. I ended up staring at the table instead. Whatever question was hanging in the air had slipped my mind. But then, maybe it was just the pills they had me on. They had all the patients sedated so bad that I often mistook my fellow patients for extras out of a zombie movie.

"You are not the first person to have a hard time," she said.

"Fuck. Not the last either," I said and felt myself smiling against my will.

She looked at me sternly. "You don't want to talk to me, do you?"

"What do you care?" I said after a few minutes. "The doc asked you and now you are here. We're only playing out the scene. Waiting for the pin to drop."

“Well, I am here, and I would like to help you,” she said.

“Thanks,” I said, “but this is not going anywhere.” I probably sighed as I said this.

"If you can't tell me about your feelings," she said, "then maybe you can try writing them down? Just as a way to get it out. You really need to get it all out sometimes. Just give it a chance."

“What planet are you from?” I said. “This is not some high-class suburb in the city. This is a death camp. They should be sending a priest instead.”

“I’m not planning to save you, Barry. I can’t do that. But why not let me see what I can do? Worst thing that can happen, is we have a chat once a week. Surely that’s not so bad? Besides, after what happened, it’s either that or you get put under surveillance.”

I wanted to get out of there, so I told her, “Ok.ay.”

Then, after a long silence in which I considered getting up and leaving, she looked at me and said, "Something must hurt really badly inside you."

“No, not particularly," I said, and started getting up.

"Then why did you try to kill yourself?" she said, as if she was trying to push things to a climax.

"Is that what happened? How sure are you, lady? Do you just believe what they tell you? Hell, I don’t need this." Maybe I had raised my voice, or maybe I rattled her a bit with what I said, but when I looked back, she looked startled.

So I left her there, and kept going, out and on to the ward where I slammed the door behind me and dropped down on the cold, white sheets. How could she know anything, if I didn't even know? And even if I did jump out that window, what was the difference between that and quietly waiting it out here in my ward, listening to the

endless coughing all around me? Why did it matter? There was really nothing to be gained.

Still, the next morning Von Hansmeyer flung open my door and with a loud "Barry, my good man!" he put down three notebooks and a few pencils on the edge of the bed.

"Now, I hear you are intent on making a bad impression," he said, and sighed. "Oh well, Miss van Vuuren will be coming in again next week. I expect you to at least make an effort. She's a decent girl and she knows her business."

I was sitting up now, still sleepy. "Come on, get dressed. You can't just lie here all day," he said, turning to leave.

When he was out, I lay back again and thought about the shrink with her red hair and her perfect nose. I wondered if this place would break her. Then I wondered if there could really be anyone who goes through life not having their smile shattered eventually. Poor girl . . .

And then, as I felt my head sinking deep into the pillow, I thought of how fixedly she had looked at me and how she had said, “I’m not planning to save you.” For the first time in ages, I wondered if I didn’t in fact want to be saved.

I was sitting by the ward window, as I often do these days. I find something deeply calming about it. It feels like being a school kid again and sleeping on after the alarm had gone. It has that sense of lingering about it. Only thing is, there is nothing chasing me. No school to get to, no waiting teachers, no bell that makes your heart beat faster.

So, I sit and look out at the parking lot, the fences glittering in the sunlight, and the path creeping across the ridge. Every day I can sit for longer and longer, watching the landscape change. It is almost as if I've never seen it. Every day it is like getting to know an old friend all over again.

I don't suppose it is a particularly good view, as views go. But I've come to know it intimately. I know its moods like that of another person, grey and bleak with the fence cold and hard, or shiny after the rain with the earth turned a deep muddy red, or as I most like it, wind-swept, dry and as bright as if a nuclear bomb has just exploded. I like staring into these days as if they are the heart of some long dead god of human suffering, as if they carry within their stark lines the answers to all the queer questions men might think of asking.

I look at it and it calms something inside me. I think it is the harshness of it that does it, the way the wind scoops up handfuls of dust and throws them against the baking metal of the tall poles that holds up the fence. It is all so senseless, just mechanical nothingness going about its business, with no care in the world, not giving a damn about its lack of hospitality.

Maybe this deathly business is where the poetry comes from. Anyway, getting the notebooks wasn't the start of anything, it was a mere progression of the weeks and months I had spent peering at that gaping hole in the fabric of things. The notebooks did, however, give me somewhere new to go with all of it . . . not that I started writing overnight, just now and again, when my scribbles started turning themselves into words.

Anyway, the morning in question must have been three or so days after the redhead's first visit, and already I had forgotten about her. It doesn't take long for the days to start melting into each other again like hot slabs of soft metal. What seemed to be

my suicide attempt, and the commotion that followed, was by far the most exciting thing to have happened to me in months, if not years. Yet, it already seemed far off, like something I had read in a book down in the hospital library.

On that morning, though, another unusual thing happened. As I sat drawing a rough sketch of the path and the fence, and the rocky ridge beyond it, a motorcade of three large, black cars crossed the ridge and speeded their way down toward us.

All three of them parked on the cement parking lot outside the main gate – for some obscure security-related reason, we had parking on both the inside and the outside. The three cars stood lined up facing straight toward us, as if they were waiting for it to get dark so that they could light up the place with their headlights. It was the middle of the day, though, and JD had told me earlier that it would reach 40 degrees out in the sun.

Then a small black man in a suit got out and ran toward the guardhouse at the gate. They talked for a minute and the man turned around. Then people poured out of the three cars. All in all there were about ten – the men all wearing suits, the two women dressed in colourful flowing robes that must have been a nightmare in the heat.

They stood around for a minute looking toward the building and talking among themselves, and then I saw Von Hansmeyer briskly walking toward them down the driveway. The guard opened the gate and let Von Hansmeyer out, closing it again behind him.

Von Hansmeyer walked straight to a plump, bespectacled man who held out a hand for him to shake. They talked for what seemed to be a very short time. Von Hansmeyer pointed toward the hospital with an expressive gesture. And then, quite suddenly, the visitors got back into their cars and drove back up the hill, out of sight, and toward the outside world.

For a moment Von Hansmeyer stood looking after them. Then, noticeably slower than on the way out, he made his way back to his flock of coughing half-corpses.

“You know who that was, Barry?” JD said behind me, giving me a fright that sent my pencil skidding to the floor. He bent over to pick it up. “That was the premier of the Eastern Cape. He came to have a look at the freak show.”

“He couldn’t have seen much,” I said.

“No sirree, but he can tell his fat cat buddies that he’s been here and he’s seen what things are like. We’ll probably read about it in tomorrow’s paper.”

JD handed me the pencil and stood hands-on-hips looking out after them, his body tangy and muscular next to me, a warm smell of detergent hanging about him. He coughed. JD’s cough was tinny, as if his insides were constructed out of a clockwork of springs and thin metal sheets.

For a moment I wondered if he saw the same thing I did when he looked out of the window. Even though I had shared a ward with him for more than a year, I felt I hardly knew him.

Story goes he had been a mechanic working in Cape Town when the bug caught him. They say he figured it out before they could lock him up, so he sold up what he could and decided to go on holiday. Eventually, you get too sick though, and if they don't pick your corpse out of some ditch somewhere, you end up here.

They say someone found him half dead in a beach house some place on the south coast, but I had never felt like asking him about it. Some part of me likes the idea of him hiding out in a desolate little wind-swept cottage in some nameless town, whisky bottles lined up next to the bed, and a stack of dirty magazines for company.

But maybe that's just me daydreaming.

I don't think anyone really knows how JD got to be here. For one thing, he has been here longer than anyone else. He even once mentioned something about the doctor who had run the place before Von Hansmeyer.

That JD recognised the premier did not surprise me: He was one of the very few people who actually read the paper that was unfailingly delivered to the hospital two days after the date printed on the front page. Why there was this delay, was never explained. But I think those who actually read the paper were just glad that we were getting it. It was one of the many things that had changed after a group of 17 patients had escaped some seven or eight months before. Why JD wasn't part of that first escape is still a mystery to me. Especially given all that were to follow.

No doubt, though, the premier was thinking of escapees as he stood surveying us. Maybe he was expecting us to storm out at any moment, nostrils flaring, arms aloft.

Those first escapees had threatened the guards with water pistols they said were filled with infected bile. Others carried plastic bags containing a sludgy yellow liquid which they said they'd aim at the heads of the guards. The head guard on duty, who was probably in on the whole thing, didn't resist and opened up the main gate without a fuss.

The bus the escapees had organised wasn't there, but nevertheless 17 of the 29 who were part of the crowd who had stormed the gate managed to get away. I never quite believed the story about the bus not being there. Sure, my recollections of what the other side of the ridge looks like are not very clear, but as I recall, it is some way to get to the highway and I can't imagine passers-by being over-eager to pick up a bunch of dirty, coughing strangers. What the real story is, I'll probably never know, though.

While escaping into the outside world just to infect more people with the deadly infection probably is not a nice thing to do, the escapees did have their reasons. Firstly, those who didn't make it said that they had to get out so that they could take care of their families. It was official policy that their social security grants were stopped when they were in hospital. Since their families were dependent on these monthly payouts, they were understandably upset.

The second complaint, and the one that made a much bigger difference to me, was the insistence that conditions at the hospital be improved. I heard there was a good deal of public outcry on the outside on behalf of us poor sods. Apparently the few remaining

members of the Treatment Action Campaign even marched to the Parliament buildings in Cape Town.

What we got out of it was new beds, a pool table, stacks of books for the library, the paper, and some committee that was supposed to represent our case in hospital management meetings. Of course, it was JD who got the job to represent us.

Either way, more than half a year after those pioneering escapees broke out, JD and I stood looking out at the dust cloud left by the retreating motorcade of Eastern Cape leadership. No doubt they were already eclipsing the speed limit on their way back to Port Elizabeth, blue lights flashing all the way.

To tell the truth, those first escapees weren't really all that heroic – of the 17 who got away, all but two were eventually caught and locked up again. The other two are probably dead by now.

Getting pills on the outside was very hard in those days. Government policy was that the blue pills could only be distributed inside treatment facilities. They didn't know, or more likely didn't want to know, that there were many more infected people living in the townships than there would ever be hospital beds for.

JD said that this was all part of the scare tactics they were using. They were probably right to lock us up, but the government did their best to make the public as scared of us as possible. Once you were locked up, you became a monster to the world, a vile human mosquito that would chase down innocents and infect them at gunpoint.

The polite thing to do was to wait around and die. I never knew what the real figures were, but I've heard that less than one in ten of the infected ever returned to the free world. That's why coming here is like a death sentence. Actually, those who died were the lucky ones. There were a few unfortunate souls who coughed their way from one year to the next without dying or getting any better. They just lay there getting old.

Not that we did anything wrong – or did we? Either way, unless we filled water pistols with our collected bile and shot our way out, we had no choice but to stay in this hospital-come-asylum-come-Alcatraz, and count imaginary black sheep while we stared at the cracking ceilings.

Sitting by the ward window some days later, the poem I wanted to write was called “goodbye world”.

Maybe I’ll ride out one day on one of those black ceiling sheep. Its nostrils glowing, its heart beating like an earthquake.

The night before the redhead was to come see me again, I woke up with the taste of blood in my throat. I tried to scream, but all that came out was a soft gurgling. I couldn't breathe. So I rolled over and after a long moment managed to cough out a thick bloody goo.

It was late, moonlight streamed through the window, and for a moment I wondered if I had been dreaming. The soft lunar light in the room felt strangely familiar, like something from a barely remembered childhood nightmare.

I screamed.

Once again, my throat seemed to contract, as if a rope was pulled tight around it. I felt something obscenely large dropping out of my nose. I think I heard JD say something, and then suddenly the lights were on and the broad-shouldered nurse was trying to look into my eyes while a stout young nurse plunged a needle into my arm.

I can't really remember much more of that night. What I lay thinking about when I woke the next morning, well-drugged and drowsy, lying under clean sheets in the emergency ward, was how scared I had felt as I struggled for air. I shuddered as I remembered the feeling of that strange thick liquid spattering from my nose.

I closed my eyes and breathed deeply.

Despite the sensation of raw, inflamed nasal membranes and throat, the air felt cool, pure and translucent. I held on to it for a second like one holds on to a joint. That morning it felt as if my throat and nose had been cleared out and covered with a thin layer of mint flavoured tile cleaner.

In the many months I had spent in the hospital I thought I had come to terms with the reaper. I had imagined walking up to him, tapping on his plastic mask, and saying something funny that had all the guys laughing in the waiting room up there at the gates of hell.

As I lay there the previous night, my blood doing its best to get away from my body, I felt an indefinable terror. I couldn't really say exactly what I was so terrified of, though. Maybe it was just instinct. Maybe the disease will leave that intact, will leave itself a little something to offer resistance when the game is almost over.

Von Hansmeyer came to check up on me and said that I had had a nodular rupture and that it wasn't really all that much to be worried about. Peering through his round spectacles he grinned and said in that German accent of his, "You were lucky, Barry. It could have been much worse."

He said that nodules burst sometimes and that it is so messy because you are "actually just coughing out all the newly freed blood and puss". "When you can't cough it out, that is when you have a problem."

He stood staring past me for a moment, and then he said that Miss Van Vuuren would be coming to see me.

And indeed, after falling asleep and then waking again more times than I can remember, I saw her sitting next to the bed, her figure smaller than I remembered, just a silhouette outlined on a chair.

I didn't say anything and drifted off back into the fever dream I had been revisiting all day. When I opened my eyes again, she was still there, looking straight at me, a clean white mask drawn tight over her mouth and nose. I lay for a while trying to remember if she had worn a mask when we had talked before. I was sure she hadn't, but why then hadn't it made more of an impression on me? Except for Von Hansmeyer, everyone wore masks.

"How are you feeling?" she said in a quiet voice that seemed not to come from her, but from somewhere far behind her.

"Drugged," I said.

"Can I get you anything?"

"No, just stay a bit."

When I came to again, she was gone, all accept for the faintest trace of her perfume that hung lingering in the air like the barely audible rustle of a dress.

I lay listening to the sounds of the hospital. The emergency ward was unusually quiet. Maybe it was because it was summer. We all do better in the summer months, especially when the Karoo dries out as it was doing at the time. They say our sick lungs prefer the dry, hot air.

There were eight beds in the ward. And apart from a hairy foot sticking out from behind a half-drawn green curtain, I was alone.

I lay for a long time like this, listening to the sounds of the hospital. There was something soothing about the distant coughing, the sound of plumbing, the footsteps in the corridor, the guards joking in a heavily accented Afrikaans.

Whatever they had given me had taken away whatever pain there must have been. I felt a strange calmness come over me, a calmness like that which sometimes overwhelms me when I'm staring out of my ward window. I like toying with the idea that it is a foretaste of death. This feeling has something eternal about it, as if I've been sitting in some long-dead deity's waiting room for ages.

Then I thought of the small, quiet silhouette that had sat next to my bed and how dark this silhouette was, and I couldn't get away from the feeling that it was like a dark flame sitting there burning for me.

Whether in waiting or in judgment, or just for no reason at all? I could not tell.

The next day, JD came to visit me. He was in a jovial mood, slapping me on the ankle and saying in a mock English accent, “Come on, old sport! Don’t just lie there. We’ve got a war to get back to.”

I didn’t know what war he was talking about, but I was glad to see him. Actually, he might have said ward and not war. My throat and nose weren’t feeling quite as tender anymore and my head seemed clearer than it had in a long time. Which is not to say that things didn’t still seem a bit out of kilter.

“What happened to you, then?” he asked. “You left in such a hurry, never even said goodbye.”

“Burst nodules,” I said.

“Those damn nodules,” he said, pulling up a chair and sitting down. You wouldn’t say JD was so sick as to be quarantined if you looked at him. Not then, anyway.

He unfolded a newspaper he had carried under his arm. Spreading it open, he lifted it up to show a picture of a man standing behind a microphone with his arm raised in a gesture that suggested he was explaining something with great passion.

“Do you recognise him?”

“Yes, he is the one who came to check us out.”

“Exactly,” JD said, “The premier himself. And do you know what he’s talking about?”

“Well, yes, while they were wheeling me in here I asked them to stop by the library for a cup of tea and a read. No, of course I don’t know.”

JD looked at me with mock impatience. “Well, it says here, ‘Premier Nkonyeni denied allegations that the province will soon be incapable of paying the wages of health workers,’ and, ‘He also reasserted the province’s dedication to containing the outbreak of

respiratory nodulosis and denied suggestions that economic difficulties would make the continued implementation of the national strategic plan an impossibility in the region.' "

He let the paper drop to his lap and looked at me. "You know what that means?"

"We're getting ice cream for dinner?" I said.

"Trouble. One word, trouble. The fool doesn't have any clue what he's doing. Do you think all our nice nurses would be here if their salaries weren't being paid? And what if the pills dry up? I see the signs, Barry, and let me tell you they are not looking good. He came here because he was worried. He never gave a damn about us before."

"I suppose that could be. Maybe he was just curious, though."

"Yes, Barry," he said and sighed. "Either way, if this newspaper is to be believed, the province is running out of money, just like the rest of the country."

"Look here," he said and picked up the paper again, "They say Volkswagen is going to close down all operations in the Eastern Cape. 'In five years' time it is expected employment in the vehicle manufacturing industry in the Eastern Cape will drop to zero.' No cars being made or put together in the Eastern Cape whatsoever. That is crazy."

"I hear you," I said, but my attention was slipping.

I closed my eyes. In a space far behind them I felt a headache coming on, a freight train coming to get me and carry me off back into sleep. Or, if they wouldn't give me more of those fine opiates in time, it would just crash mercilessly into my skull.

"JD. Call the nurse for me?" I asked.

"No problem, sport," he said, and I watched him walk out with the rolled-up paper in his hand.

Before the nurse came, though, the train crashed, my senses blurring into slow-motion as something ruptured and I blanked out.

A week or so later, late one afternoon, as I was walking slowly back from the bathroom, I saw Mazza and Sibu walking in the direction of the stairs as if they meant business. I think it was something about the narrow-eyed, determined expression on Mazza's face that made me stop and then follow them at a distance. I wasn't quite sure, but I thought I had heard some whispers in the hospital about Sibu having been pushed around in the showers.

Even though I had gotten out of emergency two days before, I was still feeling very weak. I had to lean against the wall as I walked. My head felt faint and the hospital swivelled around me. I thought of just letting them be, but remembering the tension in the mess hall, I pushed on after them.

As I reached the landing, I saw through the large window that lit up the stairs that they were already out in the backyard heading straight to where Tumi and his gang were sitting with their legs stretched out on the concrete, their backs against the wall of the laundry room. I knew that that wall would be baked hot from the day's sunlight – a warmth that felt lovely to sit against at that time of evening. If I hadn't been feeling so awful I might have gone down myself.

Tumi didn't get up when Mazza came to a standstill in front of them. As he sat there, his long limbs shiny, perfectly shaped, he looked so bored and disinterested that I wondered if he wasn't stoned or suffering from sun-induced delirium.

I saw that Mazza was saying something, but it didn't seem as if there was any reply. Then Mazza started shouting and waving his arms about at the jaded man on the floor. It seemed as if he was about to kick him, but Sibu held him back. Then Mazza stopped, leaned toward Tumi and, as I later found out, said "ikwerekwere".

From where I was standing it all seemed to happen in silent-movie slow-motion. No sound penetrated the window. All I heard was the distant clatter of plates being washed in the kitchen. It sounded like any other afternoon in the hospital.

Tumi's arm shot out and he grabbed Mazza by the ear and pulled Mazza's head, yanking it sideways. A blur of rummaging limbs ensued as the two men wrestled on the hard concrete and then rolled onto the red earth next to it. After a while, though, their movements slowed, and I saw the first trickle of blood.

As I stood there, watching from the quiet of the landing, something looked wrong, something I just couldn't put my finger on. I had seen a fight or two in my life, and this wasn't it. Then, as Mazza let go of Tumi's neck and I saw a momentary glimpse of Mazza's face, not enraged, but dead and sickly looking, I realised that these were not men fighting, but corpses.

I looked away. A deep nausea was welling up in my throat. What on earth had we come to? If I hadn't been sick just a few minutes ago, I might have been so again.

Then, quite suddenly, it was over. The tangle of limbs and torsos lay unmoving, except for two heaving chests. After a while, Mazza got up slowly and started dusting himself off amidst a heavy fit of coughing, and on the ground, Tumi lay curled up coughing lumps of bloody goo. A bright object which I took to be a knife lay on the ground half a metre from his feet.

The bystanders all stood heads bowed. Some trudged away. In all, the scuffle couldn't have lasted more than two minutes.

From below me I saw the clean white of a nurse's uniform strolling over to Tumi as if with no urgency. Mazza and Sibu were already gone. The nurse turned back and shouted to someone, and soon afterwards a second nurse and then Von Hansmeyer went rushing out, his balding head gleaming in the late afternoon.

I turned around and trudged back up to my ward. I shouldn't have followed them.

Later that evening an ambulance came for Tumi and we never saw him again. The story was that he had suffered an internal rupture and had to be treated in the large Port Elizabeth hospital. Maybe he got better and just wasn't sent back to us; no-one knows.

Mazza also turned up at the emergency room later that evening, after trying to wait out his pain and fatigue in a last show of wannabe gangster stoicism. Tumi had stayed well just long enough to inflict a long, but shallow, wound down Mazza's side. As with Tumi, though, it wasn't any cut or bruise or other wound that was the real problem: It was the inability of their bodies to cope with the exertion of the fight.

Mazza stayed in emergency a full three days, not for the cut, but to stabilise his airway.

Either way, it seemed there would be no more gang war, no-one becoming anyone else's bitch, no more threat of violence. We had lost the capacity for such things, not because our minds were purified, but because our bodies were sick.

Whereas losing the capacity for physical evil might be thought of as a good thing, I think the knowledge that we could not do battle anymore broke something in us. Until that sad confrontation, we could fool ourselves into believing we were still capable, still real men.

Sarah would have laughed had she heard me saying that. She would have said that's nonsense and that being a man has nothing to do with fighting. But she would have been wrong.

And even if she'd seen that sad struggle out in the backyard, I'm not sure she would have been able to grasp what it meant. Every patient who saw it knew exactly what it meant, though. It knocked the bottom out of your capacity to want anything, if it hadn't been knocked out a long time ago.

When I got to the dusty, unused office next to Von Hansmeyer's, she was already sitting behind the desk waiting for me, the door open. She looked up at me and from her eyes I guessed that she was smiling behind the mask. I closed the door behind me and sat down. Maybe she wasn't smiling, though. Knowing what I know now, it might just have been me misinterpreting the signs.

"How are you? Are you feeling any better?" she asked, and for the first time I noticed something tender in her large brown eyes. It was both strange and unexpected in a place like that.

"Yes, not too bad for someone on death row," I said.

"I visited you when you were in the emergency room last week," she said after a long silence. She said this looking straight at me, with a look that seemed to say that she was proud of herself for having made the sacrifice. "Did you know I was there?"

"Yes. I noticed."

"You asked me to stay," she said softly.

"I did?"

"Yes, you did."

"Well, you weren't there when I woke up."

"Well! Barry," she said, laughing, "You were out for a very long time. I couldn't wait forever. Besides, I don't like driving back to town in the dark. I did wait for a long time, though. You really shouldn't feel let down."

And I didn't. And then I thought of her silhouette again, sitting next to my bed like a dark flame burning with that hypnotic intensity.

"Do you do that with all your patients?"

“I’ll visit some people, but not everyone,” she said, her voice trailing off, as if she had been reminded of someone else. We sat in silence for a minute.

“Can you tell me about your life before the hospital?” she asked. I felt my insides go stone cold. The past was one corpse I didn’t want to dig up. Still, there was a momentum to the situation and somehow it was easier to just go with it, despite the feeling that I was walking out over the edge of a cliff.

“It is not exactly a pretty story,” I said. “You may end up despising me. I’ve done some things …”

“I want to hear it,” she said. “All of it.”

“I’m not exactly sure where to start.” I didn’t feel like dredging it up. Besides, she seemed too sweet for the kinds of things I had to tell.

I considered getting up and leaving. I felt like the choice had been given to me again; once again, though, I deferred and just let the current of the moment push me into the past. I’m not sure why I let it happen. Maybe I got soft because she’d sat there while I was out.

“Maybe start by telling me about Sarah. She’s listed as your next of kin on our files. Is she your mother, your sister?”

“Hell no, Sarah wasn’t family,” I said, my tongue slipping. I felt shocked that her name was on their files. It didn’t make any sense. I certainly hadn’t given it to them.

“Why do you say *wasn’t*?” she asked.

I couldn’t look at her. The room suddenly felt too small. “I say wasn’t, because she’s gone.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” she said, a tentative note in her voice. This was probably going too fast for her. Don’t shrinks have to drag things out of you, ask you about your parents first, before getting to the heart of things?

“Was she your girlfriend?” she asked when I was sitting up straight again, having shaken off the feeling of being trapped.

Inexplicably, I suddenly felt lighter, as if some great load had been lifted from me.

“Well, you could say that. Maybe for a while there things were pretty good, before things fell apart, before I broke the spell.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. How did things . . . fall apart?”

“Oh, I messed up.” I didn’t feel like telling her more just then, so I just sat there for a bit, staring at the wall. All that stuff seemed so far away from the hospital and the hard earth outside and the endless mornings waking up with a sore throat. Still, telling her that Sarah was dead had stirred something unexpected, so I kept talking.

“I guess Sarah and I were doomed from the start. I’m not exactly a thoroughbred, you know. And she, well, her dad, tall Polish guy, is this high-flying real estate guy and her mother has some doctorate or something, all clever conversation and posh Rondebosch accent. Never knew what to say to her. I think her dad’s father had fled Poland in the Second World War, or something dramatic like that. Nothing like me at all.”

“You look okay to me,” she said, but with such a cold edge to her voice that I didn’t know if she meant it as a compliment.

“Well, I grew up in the bad side of Parow,” I said. “My dad wasn’t exactly a nice guy. I dropped out of school when I was sixteen. There just wasn’t any point to it anymore. Then it got worse. I worked odd jobs, got drunk whenever I had money. I’m surprised she ever even looked at me. I’m just not of her class – hell, I probably hadn’t

read a book in five years before I met her." Speaking like this felt reckless and gave me a good feeling.

"But still you met," she said.

"Yes, well . . . I had ambition once, maybe even a bit of charm. Forgot my place in the world, so to speak."

"How did you meet her?"

"She was working in a soup kitchen and I was asking for soup," I joked. Miss Van Vuuren didn't find it funny, though. "No, her brother worked for the company where I was doing security. We were kind of friends. I can't quite remember how it happened. Anyway, to his never-ending regret, the mama's boy introduced me to her."

"Why regret?"

"As I said before, it all fell apart." And suddenly the thought of it all falling apart, the thought of having lost Sarah, became too much for me. The energy I had felt was suddenly gone. I dropped my head into my hands and kept quiet.

"We don't have to keep talking about the past if you don't want to," she said.

After another long stretch of thick, muggy silence, she asked if I'd got the notebooks she'd sent over for me and I told her that I had.

"Have you written anything in them?"

I considered saying that I've been trying to draw naked ladies and just couldn't get the curves right, but instead I just said, "No, not really."

"You said Sarah got you reading. Do you still read, Barry?"

"It passes the time."

"What kind of books do you like?" she asked.

"Crime," I said. "There's this James Ellroy guy who's not too bad."

"I don't know him," she said. "What is it you like about him?"

"He doesn't pull any punches."

"Honesty is important to you, then," she said more than asked. I didn't say anything to that. So we just sat for a while saying nothing. This would often happen. We'd just sit there staring at the table top or the wall, waiting for something to happen, crossing and uncrossing our legs.

"Well, let me know if there are any books I can get hold of for you."

"I don't really know. I only started reading books recently. I never really read them before I came here . . . except for the few Sarah gave me."

Going into our meeting, I hadn't really wanted to talk to her; but now I was. Maybe it was because she reminded me of Sarah. Did she really remind me of Sarah? I wonder. Or maybe it was just that she was one of the few people with whom talking was easier than not talking. The way she just kept at it until she drew you out – made talking the way of least resistance, so to speak.

On the other hand, getting to spend an hour a week with a young woman with stockings and red hair wasn't all that bad. After all, years in a males-only hospital does leave you feeling deprived. Not that I wanted to hit her over the head and drag her to my ward. Or maybe I did, but I just couldn't.

It is well-known that one of the first things the bug takes is your capacity for desire. It has to do with blood flow or something, I never quite got it. That's why the Xhosas call the bug "the tired crocodile".

Still, some however castrated, half-baked version of that maddening need to be near the warmth of a female body kept lingering. Usually it was out of sight, though, just showing up in the occasional barely-remembered dream, as if to remind you that life once was like that. Forgetting again was easy, though.

Like everything else about life at the hospital, our talks were quiet and filled with resignation. I wasn't going to get carried away or anything. Just sitting there with her, listening to the quiet up and down of her voice, watching the graceful posture of her back, or catching a glimpse of an elegant stockinged leg, had the feeling of looking at something strange and unknown.

I cared less for the probing into my past, though. After all, I knew what she didn't and couldn't know.

That night I dreamt that it was snowing outside, and even though I recognised the landscape, and the room I was in as my ward, my dream-self knew that I was somewhere in Eastern Europe. I was wearing a suit I had last worn attending church as a teenager. I remember worrying that it looked funny on me.

In front of the hospital, which was something of a stately rural retreat, there was a large circle where dark wooden carriages stood parked. From deep inside the building I heard the waxy warmth of violins playing and the soft murmur of voices. I was standing by the front door looking out at the cold. I remember there being something striking about a large black horse that stood perfectly still while snowflakes gently fell on his face. He didn't even shake his head or anything, but just stood there.

A man with a scar on the side of his face came from one of the carriages and said something to me in what I took to be Russian or Polish. I just smiled and the man smiled back and tapped me on the shoulder and indicated that I should join him.

In a large ballroom men in tailored suits were dancing with women in white dresses who wore white gloves that reached above their elbows. Thick, red velvet curtains hung from a high ceiling and golden pillars engraved with intricate plant motifs

were evenly spaced around the room. On a balcony at the far end of the hall a short, bald man was conducting a small orchestra of violin and cello.

Then, amid the throng of Eastern European gentry, I saw Miss Van Vuuren dancing with the large broad-shouldered male nurse who always handed out the pills. She was wearing her hair up and pulled back tight. I remember thinking that this brought out something young and lively in her. I watched them dance for a while, her graceful with her elegant posture and her small shoulders, and him clumsy and disinterested-looking as always.

As I was standing like this, jealousy swelling up in me, a tall girl with curly blond hair suddenly grabbed me from behind and started dancing with me. She led me onto the over-crowded dance floor, waltzing with the rise and fall of a ship at sea – which is exactly what I felt like. She kept shouting things to me in German with a stale beer breath, smiling all the time and perspiring profusely on her broad forehead. Even though my legs wouldn't move, she just dragged me along. I wanted to apologise, to excuse myself, but I couldn't get a word in.

From time to time, amid all the swinging and twirling and rising and falling I'd catch a momentary glimpse of Miss Van Vuuren with the broad-shouldered nurse. Each time they seemed to be looking deeper into each other's eyes, and each time he seemed less disinterested. Then I'd be swept away again on the music, doing my best to stay upright.

On the balcony the conductor was swinging his arms about like a man who had lost his mind. I saw his conducting stick flying through the air and being caught by a large, bearded man who held it up to the light and snapped it in two.

The music went faster and faster. And then somewhere in the turmoil, as it was all coming to an end, I saw the broad frame of the nurse leading Miss Van Vuuren into a little enclave between pillar and curtain and pulling her close, and her yielding her neatly painted lips to him.

Just then I felt a shudder of disgust as the German girl came to a standstill and I felt the sweat-drenched fabric in the small of her back.

For some reason, sitting by my ward window, my lungs thick with soot of my own making, this is what I wrote.

days drag like drag nets

like a police search for a body

out on the windy waste

out where a corpse lies waiting

in here we are the reborn dead

in here they'll never find us

never mind the line of quiet uniforms

searching, their eyes to the ground

they'll walk right by us

we have fallen from their world

they should change our names when they lock us up

call us by otherworldly numbers

cut the cord that holds us here

and set us free

At night JD often makes a strange wheezing sound. It is not loud, or anything like the snoring one hears in any of the other wards. It is a quiet inhuman whirr, as if there is some mechanical mechanism stuck in his throat. It even gets a bit scary sometimes.

When we're shooting pool in the rec room, though, this side of him is unimaginable. He is in harmony with everything around him, his eyes darting around, acknowledging passers-by with little nods and winks, his graceful hand on the green of the pool table, the tilt of his head when he looks at you. If anyone is, he is our leader. He is like a trade union man directing things on the factory floor, although I think I once heard him say he hated trade unions. He is our man on the committee, though.

The weirdest thing about JD was how healthy he seemed. Sure, his cheeks were a bit sunken and he certainly had some nights when he kept me awake with his coughing, but he never looked like someone who was going to die. He seemed content with growing old in the hospital, as if there was nowhere else he'd rather be. After all, he wasn't part of the first escape, and I'd bet my life on it that he could have been.

That is why it came as such a surprise when he mentioned the word. I was sitting as I often do, staring out to where the road crosses the ridge, when he spoke behind me. "There might be a way out," he said, calm as if he was commenting on the weather.

After a moment I said, "Yes, there might," but I was just talking.

"The time is not quite right yet, but it might be soon," he said. "Either way, I think you had better come along when it happens."

"Okay," I said.

The strange thing that day was that I didn't get excited. I wasn't playing cool and trying to stay deadpan while my insides heaved and pulsed. I had spent all my excitement and pretending in my previous life. In here, even the promise of escape sounded a bit dull.

Still, when I lay in bed that night I imagined crossing the ridge, seeing the road in front of me and holding out a thumb for one of those large trucks you could hear groaning in the distance when it had been raining.

"Escape." I rolled the word over my tongue. "Escape", that word so lightly used on the outside, so sacred in here, the word that meant the road and the city and long-legged girls in stockings and cool rolling lawns and windy beaches and the ocean and whatever else. The word that was everything but this slow dying.

The next day he pulled me aside after lunch and we went for a walk in the courtyard at the back of the hospital. We were encouraged to do this since the fresh air and exercise were said to be good for us. Besides, it was the only way to get something that resembled privacy.

We walked along the tall electrified wiring of the back fence. Beyond it the semi-desert of the Karoo lay, dead, hard and flat. I stood looking out over it and for the first time in years I felt like a cigarette.

JD stopped next to me and we stood for a minute looking out into the distance. There were no clouds, no mountains, no buildings, just the flat, dried-up bottom of an unimaginably large lake.

“I went to the committee meeting yesterday,” JD said. “It seems they might have to lay some people off. The staff are very tense about it. It’s a good time for us, Barry.”

“You mean they won’t care if we sneak out? They’ll look the other way?”

“We only need one person not to care. And we’ve already got one.”

“Well done. So, who’s digging the tunnel?”

“Well, we’re not exactly sure how we’re getting out yet. We have some options, but we still have to figure it out.”

We were walking again now. From far above us the sun beamed down its shards of nuclear radiation. I felt a bead of sweat running down my neck. “Who’s this ‘we’ you keep talking about?”

“Does it matter?” he said, looking at me oddly.

“I don’t suppose it really does,” I said.

“You can be so easy sometimes, Barry. It’s Mazza and Sibu’s master plan. In exchange for some intel, they’re willing to let me – and whoever I want to piggyback – creep through the hole behind them.”

“And the inside man?”

“I don’t know. They’re not telling me. But they’ll have to tell me sooner or later.”

“I suppose it sounds okay,” I said.

“Is that all you can say? Sounds okay?” There was an angry note in his voice now. “This is your fucking chance to get out of this hell hole. Do you just want to sit here and die? Damnit, man! I’m not asking the whole hospital to come along. I’m asking you. Don’t be so damn ungrateful.”

I waited for a minute for him to calm down. We had come to the corner of the hospital’s backyard. Far over the horizon to the east I thought I saw a thin column of smoke rising. It was hard to tell if it was real, though.

“I’m not exactly ungrateful,” I said, but as I said it I knew the way that I said it was wrong.

“Fuck, man!” he said and walked away, leaving me alone in that spot. I watched him as he walked across the backyard to the large doors that opened out of the main corridor on the lower level. His steps were large and quick like those of a man who knew exactly where he was going.

There was something odd about the way his head was tilted slightly to the left. Somehow I had never noticed it before. I wondered if that had anything to do with the bug. Maybe his infection had spread up his throat. Or maybe it was an injury from before, something that happened in a workshop in Goodwood or some other Cape Town suburb from his other life.

Then I turned around and looked back out over the waste beyond the fence. And then I looked at the fence itself.

The hard metal pole in front of me had an opaque shine to it. It was just a piece of metal, but it meant that JD, Mazza and Sibu had to make plans for their freedom and that grown men had to have secret meetings in backyards of quarantine hospitals.

Then I thought how different a pole looked from up close. I had gotten used to staring at the poles at the front of the building from my seat at our ward window, but seeing a pole like this was different. It wasn't part of a picture, but just a stupid hard everyday object. Just standing there. Still, I stood there for a while and then considered marking it as my own.

And then I did.

Outside the ward window, the Karoo is a deathly dull grey. Looking at it is like staring into a hole in the fabric of reality. You don't see anything beyond it, though, just more of the same old nothingness.

I guess I'm not feeling too good. But that's okay, as they say. It happens to all of us.

Just, it happens more and more. I used to think it's the pills that did it, that took the last life that I had in me and dissolved it and let me breathe it out unknowingly. Blaming the pills is bullshit, though.

Every day I just sit here. And every day just rolls over into another. I don't talk to anyone anymore, and I see the same thing in some of the others. We're all dying. But that's not it either. Here where we are, we've seen what we shouldn't have.

Then again, maybe I went hollow inside when Sarah died. I used to think that. But I don't know. Maybe I was always hollow inside, the husk man.

Anyway, all that sounds a bit melodramatic, I'm sure. But what do you do when you sit in front of a window day after day staring at a dead piece of earth with a fence on it, all the time listening to people around you cough their way to death?

"We'll tar the roads to hell with the tar in our lungs. And what heavenly choir of prostitutes, pimps and degenerates there awaits us we greet with salutations of despair."

This is what I write in the notebook.

As I wrote it, JD was lying on his bed, his breathing deep and regular. Earlier he had been complaining that he felt like a shipwreck after a storm in Table Bay. He had a pale look about him and I felt a bit worried for him. I didn't say anything, though. Ever since the scene in the backyard we hadn't really been talking much.

I don't suppose I can blame him, though.

Still, whatever hope JD imagines out there is folly. It is nothing but ghastly throw-away wasteland and the husks of men. He needs to move, that is all. Maybe he knows it's pointless and it is the moving itself that makes him want to do this thing.

And even though I'm there with him, I can't move. I just don't have it in me.

There was a queer white light in the ward. A strange toxic mist had drifted in from an open window. I walked over to close it. I remember feeling scared. Beyond the ridge I saw the smoke of a large fire. Where the gates were supposed to be, there was nothing. The parking lot was empty.

Only then I looked round and realised that the ward was empty. There was a deathly quiet. I walked into the corridor and down to Von Hansmeyer's office. The door was open. I looked in, but he wasn't there. His glasses lay on his desk, some books were scattered on the floor, and his phone was off the hook.

Still, I didn't really think any of this strange. Was it not the inevitable end of a place like this, particularly in a time like this? Aren't all governments temporary, all societies only temporary, all hospitals nothing but temporary sandbags to stop the inevitable flood of human decay?

Back down the corridor and downstairs I found an upturned cart with medical supplies. Still no-one. I pressed open the cold steel door of the room where they kept the stiffs. I don't know what I was hoping. Maybe for Von Hansmeyer's outstretched body, his eyes pale, swollen balls, the red glow finally subsiding from his cheeks.

But he wasn't there. There was no-one there. I stood in the doorway listening to the silence.

Already a thin layer of dust was gathering on the floor.

Then I thought I heard something creak, as if someone was pushing open a gate that had long been rusted shut. I turned around and started looking into all the downstairs wards, the offices, the kitchen. There was no-one.

I pushed open the front door and suddenly it was very bright. I crossed the parking lot to where the gates were missing. I stood where they should have been and tried to feel the exhilaration of freedom. But it wouldn't come. Then off to one side I saw one of the gates lying in the dirt, its metal blue and shiny.

Ahead of me was the ridge and beyond it the smoke was still dark and grey against the sky.

I walked up the path that led over the ridge and toward the place where the smoke was darkest. From the top of the ridge I saw the blacktop some hundred meters off. There weren't any cars.

Then, about halfway down the path, I heard a strange whirring sound that sent chills through my whole body. I crouched down in an earthy ditch of sorts and then I saw it coming. It was a car like any other, except it had a loose-fitting, light blue plastic wrapping round its wheels. It was the flapping of these bags that made the terrifying noise.

I can't remember seeing anyone in the car, but I'm sure there was someone.

Either way, those light blue bags terrified me more than anything I can ever remember frightening me. It was as if they held within their unearthly whirr the essence of some entity so foreign from our world as to make all earthly horror seem but the playthings of children.

When I woke, I was drenched in a cold, sticky layer of sweat. I rolled onto my side and looked out of the window. It must have been about four or five, to judge by the light. Just above the horizon, the sky was already being stained with a milky coldness.

I felt shaken by the dream. Something about that sound still echoed inside my mind, and the sense of terror was as fresh as if I was still huddled out there across the ridge. But I wasn't. So I pulled the sheet tight about me and told myself that it was all over.

I was wide awake, though. So I lay on my side trying to catch the sky in the moment of changing. The day was slow in coming.

As I lay there, as if from nowhere, I remembered a fishing trip once long ago, and the coldness of the air on my face and hands, and the quiet of the water with the mist rising from it.

I had gone with an uncle or someone – it wasn't my dad. We had struggled through some thick undergrowth to get to the small dam that lay cool and pale in the predawn sanctity. I remembered the feeling of papery thorns sucking through my socks and scratching my ankles.

It must have been the first and only fish I ever caught. Of the catching I remember nothing. I just remember the glittering scales as it lay on some shale, one round eye looking straight up at the sky, only the faintest of quivers in the tea-brown, hard jello of his eyeball. Then suddenly he slapped his tail and bounced a centimetre or two off the ground.

And then I had to bash its head against a stone to put it out of its misery.

I lay for some time trying to remember where this dam was and who I had gone with, but I couldn't. Still, the memory of that fish and what it felt like to sit next to that dam was as clear as if it was but a day or two ago.

Then I remembered my mother waking me up early one morning during a school vacation, and then sleeping in the backseat as we drove through the cold morning air toward some distant family member, now also long forgotten.

And then as if one thing had led to the other I suddenly felt the full weight of my lungs. I turned onto my back again to let the two pus-filled weights inside me rest more easily. They suddenly felt enormous, as if the organs that were once my lungs were on the verge of squashing everything else in my chest.

So I lay still and tried to breathe as well as I could. But with each breath now I felt the sickening sludge spreading through my body, preparing to spread whatever

inflammation it could, all in the name of paralysing its sad host. I felt it draining the strength from my limbs, and wondered if I'd be able to get up once it was light.

But then again, maybe I had been feeling sick all along, and I had just forgotten for a moment.

I sat waiting for her in the room next to Von Hansmeyer's. I got up to open the window. Down below I saw two patients sitting on a low wall, not saying anything to each other. They sat like that for a good two minutes, hardly even moving to shift their weight. The one man had a crop of short, curly hair with a large scar running down his left temple. I found it strange that I had not noticed this man before.

A bank of low, grey clouds hung far above them like a blue sky in a black and white movie. I breathed in the air as deep into my foul, compromised lungs as I could. It was hot and stuffy with the smell of rain lingering just out of sight. It was building up, and sooner or later it would erupt. Or maybe it wouldn't. Maybe we would be passed by and the clouds would drop their bounty 500 kilometres to the East, where they hardly needed it.

With the windows wide open, I went back to my chair and sat down. A gentle breeze, now warm, now cool, rustled through the room as if to express a kind of indecision.

Just then I heard footsteps in the hall, and a moment later Miss Van Vuuren came through the door, her dark lipstick smeared and a strand of hair hanging down her face.

"Sorry I'm late, Barry," she said, out of breath. "I just couldn't get away early enough."

She took off a thick, dark grey jacket and sat down behind the desk. Then, as if suddenly realising the window was open behind her, she turned in her chair and sat like that for a moment, looking out to where there now seemed to be something darker about the clouds.

Then she looked back at me and said, "So how are you, Barry?" And before I could answer, she gave a little yelp and reached for her bag, laughing. From it she took a crumpled mask she had obviously used before and slid it over her head. That must have been the day I saw her lips.

"I'm okay," I said. "But maybe I should be asking you that question."

At this, the parts of her cheeks visible next to the mask became even more flushed. Then she bent down and took two books from her bag. "I brought you these," she said, and handed them to me over the desk. As I reached for them, I caught a whiff of a spicy dark perfume that reminded me of a rainy day in Cape Town many years ago.

"*The Black Dahlia*," I read aloud. "And *Out of Sight*. Thank you." I figured that I wouldn't tell her that I had already read the James Ellroy. After all, I might as well read it again.

"You seem excited," I said.

"Well, maybe," she said. "But you know we're not here to talk about me."

"We're both just people," I said.

After a few moments she said, "Okay, maybe I'll tell you about me some other time. Let's just stick to you for now. How are your lungs doing?"

"My lungs are as foul as ever," I said.

And then for no reason I could think of, I started telling her about the dream I'd had in which the hospital was deserted and I had crossed the ridge. I wasn't sure if I should tell her about the cars with their strange light blue wheel-covers and that haunting sound, but I did. And as I was telling her, I suddenly realised where the image had come from.

Years before, I had worked on a construction site in the southern suburbs. I was doing the clean-up job after the painters and carpenters had done their thing. Thing was, there were these blue plastic covers we had to put over our shoes when walking around in the newly built apartments to make sure we don't carry in dirt on the soles of our shoes. Even though the plastic covers in the dream fitted around a whole wheel, they were the same, made of the same material, held in place by the same weak elastic.

She listened intently to my story. And even though I could see her shrink's mind starting to work, I didn't care. Let her analyse me, why not? What would it matter anyway?

When I was done, she asked if that awful sound reminded me of anything, and why I thought it had terrified me so much. I told her that I had no idea, but that it had something otherworldly about it.

Then she asked me, "Do you think, Barry, that the thing you feared in your dream might have been death?"

"You mean that my mind created this sound because it didn't just want to say it straight out?"

"Something like that. I'm just asking if that seems right to you," she said, her voice still raspy with the exhilaration of whatever had preceded our meeting.

"I don't know. Probably not," I said. "I don't really have any trouble thinking about death."

We were both quiet for a minute. The soft wind from the window felt colder now and had the smell of rain on it. When I looked up, she seemed to be lost in recollection of something – something I guessed had happened earlier that day.

Maybe I was jealous, I don't know. I imagined some upstanding guy out in the town, a normal life, some passion, weekends away, whatever it is it people do when they are not dying. I guess I wanted to shock her, to poison her perfect little world with the dull thing inside me.

"Actually," I said, "I wouldn't much care if I died right now. You know, cut myself open, watch as the nurses scramble around me, struggling to patch me up."

Something about the way she looked at me immediately made me feel sorry I'd said it. But it was said, so there was nothing I could do. On cue, a cloud passed over the sun and the room suddenly felt even colder.

She pulled herself together very quickly, though. "Is that what you tried to do when you jumped from the balcony?" she asked.

"I can't remember, honestly, that day is a blank to me. It has been erased; probably by some pill they're giving me."

"Okay, so you're not afraid of dying, Barry; but that is not the only way out of here. Don't you want to go back to Cape Town? Aren't there people you want to see?"

"Are you suggesting I escape?" In my mind's eye I saw the road beyond the ridge, a truck pulling up, city lights beckoning in the distance.

"No, of course not," she said, her voice serious. "But you know there is a chance you may be cured. I've seen your file, and even though your chances aren't great, you do have a chance."

"You think I should hold on to the hope? Keep the flame burning? That is precisely the problem between us. From where you sit, that kind of talk makes sense. But you've just come from hell knows where and probably have a tennis match lined up for this evening and drinks at some nice restaurant, while I came from a ward where I lay waiting for this nonsense all day, trying to fight off one spell of nausea after the other. You think that kind of hope is going to do me any good?"

"Okay, would escape be different then?"

"Don't you get it? It doesn't fucking matter!" I shouted. "The game is up anyway." And then, softer, "Are we done yet?"

"We're done, if you want to be," she said softly.

When I got to the door I looked back and I saw that she was staring after me with a strange expression about her, her eyes large, as if shocked, but the corners of her mouth twitching, smiling. I wanted to say that she shouldn't have come here, that she should have stayed in town, where she could get her lipstick smeared and her hair dishevelled and whatever else she wanted to do. I didn't say any of those things, though. I just went to my ward and lay down.

After all, how could she possibly understand what torture it is for the dead to watch the living? Couldn't she see that life was over for me? That Sarah was in the past? That there would be no way back for me?

Even as I got angry with her, I knew that I had done the talking. I had let her ask me. As much as I wanted to kill all hope and any link to the past, some degenerate part of me wanted to keep it alive. I wanted to bang my head against that wall, and I wanted her to listen.

When I thought of how I left her sitting there, I felt ashamed. Maybe for the first time since meeting her, I felt sorry for not being nicer to her.

Back in the ward, I lay on my bed and swore a few times.

On his bed, JD swore back. I swore a bit louder, and then he laughed. I told him to fuck off, but for the first time in a long while I was glad to have him there.

I think someone died last night. I cannot be sure, but I woke up in the middle of the night and heard someone anxiously talking in the corridor. I think I heard him saying something like, "Let's keep quiet about this. Let us not alarm anybody for nothing." And then I heard what I thought to be a stretcher being pushed past our door and a second voice saying something about the mortuary.

I toyed with the idea that it might have been Von Hansmeyer, but I didn't think it was. He is never here at night. And besides, I wasn't quite awake. But I did hear a car start up a while later, and heard it pulling away.

I wanted to get up, but when I moved, my head I felt dizzy. Sometimes the pills do that to me. So I just lay awake and thought about who might have died, imagining different people's bodies on the stretcher. And, of course, my own, too. What's that they say about the only way out?

Anyway, I repeated those words endlessly, trying to think what it could mean: "Let us not alarm anyone." And then I felt a shaking laughter growing from the pit of my stomach. After all, did they really think we'd be alarmed? Didn't they know that we were as good as dead already, that the credits had played for us, that we were just waiting for someone to turn on the lights and tell us to leave?

But then, they were from the other world. The one where people only occasionally cough and aren’t trapped in scrap-metal bodies, waiting to be recycled.

I lay for a long time listening, but there was nothing more. I eventually heard JD moving in his bed and guessed that it must almost be morning. I decided I'd try to sleep. As I drifted away, though, I made a mental note to investigate the mysterious whispers once I had gotten some sleep.

When I woke, it was already light and I rushed to get down to breakfast before everyone started leaving. I tried to do a headcount of everyone I knew, but I soon gave this up, since there was no way of knowing who was in emergency or too sick to come

down to eat. And besides, I wasn't keeping up with the fast turnover of patients in the hospital.

I sat with JD and some of the other hospital elders who were discussing the severe droughts that had been plaguing the United States. Apparently civil unrest was breaking out because people were beginning to starve in the South.

Across the mess hall I saw Mazza and Sibu gesticulating wildly in what I took to be a fake argument. It ended with Mazza punching his sidekick on the arm, at which Sibu stepped back and dragged his finger across his neck, nodding slowly and then bursting into laughter.

The only person I could think of who wasn't in the hall was the unknown man with the scar and the short curly hair I had seen from the window while waiting for Miss Van Vuuren. In fact, I never saw him again after that day. When I asked people about him, they didn't know either. "Don't know anyone like that," they'd say, shaking their heads.

I had certainly seen him, though. But I guess people do just disappear some times.

After breakfast I went back up and walked slowly down the corridor that led past our ward. I don't know what I was hoping to find, maybe a tell-tale bloodstain, or a trail of stretcher tracks in the dust that would lead me to the hidden-away corner where the ghastly thing had happened. I didn't find anything, though.

I thought of asking Von Hansmeyer, but as soon as I thought it, I realised that that would be as pointless as my search in the corridor. For all his Médecins Sans Frontières goodwill and optimism, he wouldn't tell me. As a rule they just didn't mention the dead.

So I wandered about, scouting out what everyone was doing. Eventually I heard Von Hansmeyer's voice booming inside one of the downstairs wards. Very good. There were very few nurses as far as I could see on the upper level. So I strolled to what I knew would be his empty office, as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

When I got to the door, I looked around. It was a quieter part of the hospital and I would certainly be asked what I was doing there if someone found me. My heart beat like a movie-style time bomb inside my chest, and quite apart from that my lungs were already struggling with the effort of all the morning's walking about.

I turned the shiny bronze handle. To my surprise, it gave and I pushed the door open, stumbled in, and quickly shut it again behind me.

It took a minute for my eyes to get used to the room. After the bright white of the corridor, his office seemed dim and stuffy. The only light came from the window in front of which a grey curtain was hanging in long, vertical folds. The floor was covered in grey carpet that was a shade or two lighter than the curtains.

As with my previous visit, the office felt as if it could be in Sandton or Newlands. It felt as if I could open the door again and emerge into a busy corporate corridor with large windows overlooking a busy city street. The only thing missing was the sound that would have accompanied such a place. There was no hum of traffic here, no far-off car alarms going off or people shouting, just a deep silence.

As my eyes adapted to the light, I stepped over to his desk and started looking through the stacks of papers. A basket on the corner held his mail, while a pile of papers relating to hospital supplies lay in front of his chair with a pen lying on top of it. I took great care to replace everything I touched exactly as it was. Still, when I put the pen back on top of the pile of papers I wasn't quite sure if it had lain with the tip of the pen facing toward or away from his chair.

I'd assumed that any papers relating to the person who had died the previous night would be lying on his desk or on the top of a pile somewhere. But there weren't any papers lying about. For some reason I hesitated with the desk drawers, so I went over to the large filing cabinet instead. I slid open one of the drawers and found it stuffed with yellow paper files labelled with the names of patients.

I couldn't help but scan the list for my own name. My heart was beating much faster now. I thought I heard something outside the door and froze for a few seconds, my eyes fixed on the door. All I heard, though, was that deep, all-pervading silence.

As I stood watching the door, it dawned on me that somewhere he must keep a list of everyone in the hospital and everyone who has died. Surely if I could find this list and take a look at the last entry, the mystery would be solved.

Instead, though, I looked back down – and straight at a file labled "James, Barry".

Making a mental note that it lay between "Jacobs" and "Johannes", I lifted it out and flipped it open. It contained an envelope with x-rays and a small pile of papers, some stapled together, some lying loose.

The top page contained a list of personal details listed under my name and identification number. I got a slight shock when I read, "Admitted: 2 October 2016". Had it really been three years? I should have been either dead or back on the outside already. The "initial diagnosis" said, "respiratory nodulosis, third degree resistance". And then there were a lot of boxes still unfilled carrying labels like "expelled", "date of death", and so on.

I turned the page and saw long columns of medical jargon written in Von Hansmeyer's forceful handwriting. I paged through more medical scribbling and near the back I found a page marked "serious incidents".

"14 November 2019: Attempted suicide. Mr. James was found unconscious having suspectedly jumped from a second-floor balcony. No major injuries. Put under close observation by staff. Psychological report requested from Dr. L. van Vuuren."

I turned the page and there it was.

"Preliminary psychological report. Patient: James, Barry. Consulting psychologist: Dr. L. van Vuuren. Mr. James exhibits a variety of depressive symptoms, possibly indicative of major depression. A positive diagnosis can, however, not be made

yet. Due to his recent suicide attempt and continued suicidality, it is recommended that he be kept under close observation until further notice. It is also recommended that he undergoes at least one session of psychological counselling per week."

Her signature underneath this was small and neat. I stared at it for a moment. It struck me that I was now not only a patient suffering from the bug, I was also a mental case. I was going psycho.

I turned the page and read the heading "Patient history". Just as I was about to read it, I heard footsteps and voices coming from the corridor. I closed the file, slid it back between "Jacobs" and "Johannes", and then stood watching the door, not knowing what to do.

So I stood like that, hands hanging by my side and with nowhere to hide, and watched as the bronze door handle turned and the door slowly opened inward. Then it stopped about halfway and I heard Von Hansmeyer saying "very well, very well" to someone whom I then heard walking away.

Then the door swung open and he stood in the doorway fixing me with his small, dark eyes. His cheeks looked particularly red to me then, an effect enhanced by the immaculate whiteness of his coat. He stood staring at me for a moment with his head slightly cocked to one side. He didn't seem surprised at all. I imagined that in his mind he was calculating various possible scenarios, looking for the one that would deal with the situation most quickly and efficiently.

"Mister James," he said. "You were looking for something?"

"My file," I said.

Then he closed the door behind him and slowly took off his coat and hung it on a hook behind the door. He walked around the far side of his desk to get to his office chair. As he lowered himself into it, he looked at me and said, "Please have a seat, Barry."

He took a pair of spectacles from his shirt pocket and balanced them on his nose. He looked down at his pen and I saw a slight frown forming on his forehead. It was gone as soon as it was formed, passing over his face like a charge of submerged electricity.

I sat down and waited for him to speak. He just sat there, though. The faint light from the window reflected on his forehead and suddenly there seemed to be something misshapen about him, as if the contours of his face had shifted.

Eventually he bent down and felt for something in a desk drawer. Then he straightened up and flipped the lid off a pill box. I watched him dig out a large white pill with his index finger.

"Take this," he said and leaned across the desk to hand it to me.

It felt heavy in my hand, unlike any pill I had ever taken. I looked up at him and he nodded, so I put the pill in my mouth and swallowed.

"Well, you know, Barry, sometimes things are not what they seem. You think you are doing one thing but you are really doing something very different. When I came to South Africa thirty-three years ago, I thought I was going to make a difference. 1986, Barry, were you even born then? Do you know what this place looked like then?

"I was a young man. And now, here I am sitting in this office in a hospital that is running out of money and where the patients make themselves comfortable in your office and smile like dumb chickens when you catch them out. In thirty-three years, Barry, nothing has changed. It has just been one mess after the other. But look at me, Barry." I looked at him, but suddenly found it hard to focus on the figure on the other side of what now seemed to be a very large desk. "You see, Barry, I am still here. I'm not running away. I'm not going back to Hamburg. I'll keep on doing my work until the day they bury me in this hard earth of yours."

I wanted to tell him that I couldn't quite see, that I was feeling a bit drowsy and couldn't quite follow him. But when I tried to talk, my jaw suddenly seemed too heavy to move and I just sat there, waiting for him to go on.

"You see, Barry, people in this country are lazy. They expect the world to fall into their laps. The premier comes here and asks me why there is a white man in charge here. He doesn't even come inside to see what we've done with the hospital. He just stands there and tells me that this place doesn't look like what he expected and then he drives away.

"But I've seen men like him. They come and go, Barry. That's why I say we have two kinds of men. Those who do things, who fight on no matter what, and those who just take what they can get and fall apart as soon as things get hard. I will fight, Barry, this is how I am. And you, you are the other kind of man. You have no backbone. You just sit around waiting to die and leave it to others to clean up after you. You are vermin, Barry."

My eyelids had drooped closed by now, but his words nevertheless registered, almost as if they had been said by a devil somewhere inside my own head. I forced my eyes open and saw that he was standing. Behind him the light seemed to have dimmed. It reflected strangely off his spectacles, and for a moment there seemed to be something supernatural about him.

"You are not to come here again, Barry, unless you are invited by me personally. If you want to know something, you ask me. You do not sneak around like a thief. I will not stand for it. Whatever you were before you came here, I do not care. Here you will behave yourself."

I felt a sickness in the pit of my stomach. I felt like crying, like asking him to forgive me and whether he would help me fight the good fight. A moment later, though, another part of me thought that it was all bullshit, that he was putting me on with the same good fight nonsense that they preached in the motivational booklets from the Department of Health.

Afterwards, I figured that it must have been the pill. It isn't strange to think the opposite of what is really in your head when you feel sick. Doesn't nausea and guilt go hand in hand? Wouldn't anything he had said seemed plausible to me then?

I remember him stepping away from the window and coming toward me. Then, the tiredness became too much and I blacked out.

When I awoke, I was back in the ward, clean and white with bright sunlight streaming in through the window. A terrible headache was throbbing in my left temple and I felt an immense weariness in my limbs. Through a loud, windy ringing in my ears I could hear JD moving about by his bed. I tried to say something and he came over to my bed.

"You had us worried there, sport," he said. "You were out for almost a day and a half."

"How did I get here?" I asked.

"Carstens found you by the storerooms lying in your own vomit. They had you in emergency for observation, but they sent you back here because everything was normal. Apart from you sleeping like a bear."

"Something strange is going on, JD," I said. "I think we should get out of here, if you're plans are still, I mean, if we're still . . ."

"Hey!" he said, holding a finger up to his lips. "Take it easy, sport. You don't want to tell the whole world."

Then he gently tapped me on the knee and asked if he could get me anything. "Von Hansmeyer said I should let him know when you've come around," he said.

Then, with a chill, I remembered a flash of Von Hansmeyer's office and suddenly I had the disconcerting sense that there was a third person standing somewhere behind me

in that room. Slowly the memories of our chat came back to me. But I couldn't get rid of the feeling that there had been someone else there as well.

And then suddenly I had an image in my head of a piece of paper being put in front of me to sign. But whether this was real or just an imagined memory was unclear. It didn't seem to fit anywhere. But somehow it had the vividness of a memory.

Later, I got up and took a shower. My body felt bloated and lumpy under the cold water. Standing in the shower was good, though. I was washing something off myself. Whatever had happened the previous evening, whatever dreadful death awaited me here, I felt as if I was washing it all off me like the accumulated dirt of many months.

When I was done, I heard someone coughing in the dressing area. As I rounded the corner, I saw Sibu bent over, coughing a slimy, yellow goo into a wad of toilet paper. He seemed very frail to me, nothing but a thin bony man in a dirty towel. Then he saw me and turned around, his shoulders immediately taking on a posture that tried to say, "I'm in control." He winked at me. "Mechanic says you're joining us. Better be ready, white boy."

"I'll be ready," I said and winked back at him. Inside me I felt relieved that JD had been pushing my case, even while we weren't talking.

When I got back to the ward, JD was out. Feeling more refreshed than I had in a long time, I pulled my chair up to the window and opened it wide. It was late afternoon and the worst of the day's heat had abated.

Then I looked for a notebook, but saw that they had been moved from the top drawer of my bedside table. I opened the second drawer, and there they were, neatly stacked with the pencils lying next to them.

It upset me that someone had moved them and probably paged through them. Even though I knew from the start that I wouldn't be able to hide them or lock them up, I had somehow assumed they'd be safe.

I thought of Von Hansmeyer and imagined him sitting in his dusky little office peering at my crooked handwriting through his little round spectacles. Maybe he wanted me to know that my papers weren't safe either. Then again, it might just have been a cleaner. To hell with it, I thought.

I sat for a while looking out at the guard, out there in his little guard tower by the gate. He seemed to be constantly busy with something. Standing with phone in hand, then disappearing out of sight for a few moments, then bending over to write something. Whatever could keep him so busy was a mystery to me. Apart from the comings and goings of the staff, he could hardly have anything to do.

When JD came back, I told him that I saw Sibu in the bathroom and that he didn't look good. JD just said "yes" and sighed.

"Are things moving forward?" I asked tentatively.

"Yes. It shouldn't be too long now. There's a hospital management meeting tomorrow. Maybe after that we'll have an idea of when. If you want, we can go for a walk tomorrow and I'll fill you in on what we're thinking."

"That sounds good," I said. "I can do with a bit of a stretch the way I'm feeling."

"Okay, we have a deal."

I woke up the next morning feeling better than I'd felt in a long time. After a large breakfast, including two cups of coffee, I went for a walk around the hospital and then went back to the ward to write in my notebook. As I sat down, I wondered if the pill Von Hansmeyer had given me wasn't cleaning me up. Maybe it was some new drug they were testing that made you vomit and cough out all the bad things, leaving you cleaner and healthier.

As I sat looking out the window, I saw a small silver Hyundai crossing the ridge and driving down to the gate. When it stopped, a red-haired woman in a blue summer's dress got out and walked over to the guardhouse. She waved and said something to the guard and his broad bestubbled smile was visible all the way from where I was sitting.

Miss Van Vuuren didn't look up once on her way to the hospital's front door. I watched her walking with a briskness that seemed to have something irrepressibly optimistic about it. I thought I could smell the sweet spiciness of her perfume rising up from her bare shoulders, but that must have been my imagination.

Amidst a fit of coughing I wondered if I hadn't fallen just a little in love with her, and then viciously cursed myself. Of course that was to be expected. Isolated, and on the verge of death, as I was, it probably didn't matter much what young woman they sent in. She brought the colours of something living into the hospital . . . even though I might have preferred to forget the very existence of those colours.

Remembering her smudged lipstick, I felt a shiver of jealousy that I imagine must be something like what the old feel when seeing young lovers walking hand in hand. Not that, I thought. Let me be. Do not tempt me with life when I am already detaching my spirit from this fragile mess.

So, once her light blue figure had passed out of sight, I resolved to forget all about her and concentrate on the poem I was trying to write about Von Hansmeyer's pill and the mysterious sense of renewal I was feeling. It felt clean, as if all else had been stripped away from me, and the more I focussed on that feeling, the more pure it became.

A few hours later, I was once again standing in the back yard, looking out over the deadness of the veld beyond the fence. And as before, JD was standing next to me, his gaunt face at once serious and without any sign of tension. I felt as if we should have had cigarettes in our hands, staring out between clouds of smoke like actors in an old black and white movie.

"So? Let me have it," I said.

"Well, first thing, Barry, things have gotten a bit bigger. Meintjies and McKenzie are also coming along. I told Mazza that I think it would be wrong to leave good men behind. He responds to that kind of talk, so the whole thing's gotten a bit bigger now. But we're still only taking people we trust one hundred percent."

"That sounds fine by me. But do you know when and how yet?"

"Patience, sport," he said with a mock smile.

He turned and we started walking along the fence toward the furthest corner of the backyard. "I was at the management meeting this morning, as I told you. From next month, they are cutting the staff by thirty percent. The important thing is that it's mainly going to hit the night staff. One guard in the tower, one security man in the control room and on call for the rest of the hospital, and three nurses for emergencies. That is all."

He stopped and with a self-satisfied look in his eyes asked, "How does that sound to you, sport?"

I told him that it sounded ridiculous. "What are they thinking? We're over a hundred patients here."

"Ridiculous if you are staying, maybe. But perfect if you want to sneak out."

"Yes," I nodded and we started walking again.

"So, sport, we are talking about next month some time. Exactly when, will depend on the new work schedules. We got lucky, our inside man is staying on and should be on security a few times next month. We still have to figure out how exactly we're going to punch a hole, but our inside man should have control over the lights back here and the current in the fence."

We reached the corner of the yard and again stood staring out. "Do we know what's out there?" I asked.

"Not really," he said. "Maybe that's something you can help us with. You know the library better than I do. Maybe there's a map or something somewhere."

"Sure, I'll take a look. But we don't have a getaway car or anything like that, do we?"

"No," he said. "I think they've got a ride, but they're not sharing that. Once we're out, we are on our own."

After another few seconds standing like that, looking at the pole I had marked a few weeks ago, I turned around. Then I froze. Side by side in a second-floor window across the courtyard I saw Von Hansmeyer and Miss Van Vuuren, standing next to each other, looking straight at us.

"Barry?" JD said.

"Don't look," I said, "We're being watched."

At which JD turned around and looked straight at them. Then, after a long moment, he lifted his right hand and waved. Only Miss Van Vuuren lifted her hand and waved back feebly.

While the two of them waved, Von Hansmeyer and I stood perfectly still. I felt his eyes resting on me across what must have been more than fifty metres. It was as if he were reaching inside me in search of something very specific that he wanted to pull out

with those large fingers of his. I felt he was groping around for my heart, or whatever you choose to call the essence that keeps a man alive.

Then again, maybe he just wanted his pill back.

‘I saw you standing outside with your friend yesterday,” Miss Van Vuuren said, her voice more businesslike than usual. “Is he your room-mate?” She had come in with a briskness about the way she walked. Her hair was tied up neatly behind her head, and the mask she wore, looked brand new. She was nothing like the flushed, dishevelled girl of our previous meeting.

“Yes, he is. We saw you too.”

“Sorry, I guess we were spying.”

“That’s okay,” I said. “I did some spying of my own.”

“Doctor Von Hansmeyer told me,” she said, smiling with her eyes.

“Of course he did. That is just like the bastard.”

“He is not that bad, you know. He doesn’t have to do this. He could quite easily go back to Europe and have a very comfortable life in Germany. Instead, he is struggling away down here, working for next to nothing. He is one of the good guys.”

Behind her, the window was closed. The day had turned blustery. Earlier that morning, when I had sat staring out of my ward window, it had seemed sunny and quiet. Now, the clouds had drifted in like an afternoon headache.

“Have you thought any more about what we spoke about last time?” she asked. I thought I could detect a weary undertone in her voice.

“Yes, I suppose I think about that stuff all the time. I’m sorry if I was rude to you. I got a bit carried away. It’s hard to explain what it’s like in here, though. I’m not sure I could ever get it across.”

“That’s okay,” she said, her voice so gentle it hurt. “Of course I can’t understand, but I’ll try, Barry.”

We were quiet again. The wind tugged at the window pane. There were barely audible noises drifting toward us from somewhere deep in the hospital. I looked past her at the bank of grey clouds. Then I looked straight into her big, brown eyes and she looked straight back at me. We had reached some kind of stasis, a ledge on a rocky slope. Any further talk could dislodge everything and send us back our separate ways.

"Sarah's parents had a house in Rondebosch," I said, after a long silence. "She and her brother were watching it one holiday. I remember standing in their garden and feeling so terribly out of place in that world. You know Rondebosch . . . tall trees, thick, cool grass, large houses, families. I went inside and she was sitting on this white leather couch reading a book, the leaves throwing moving shadows on her hair. She read me a Keats poem then . . . I don't remember the poem, but I remember how I felt. I still think of that sometimes, quite often, actually.

"Anyway, that part was the pretty bit, the picket fence. She took me in and let me see their world of privilege."

"Were you jealous of them?" she asked.

"No," I said. "It was nothing like that. It was all just a run of crazy luck that she let me into her life. If anything, I was thankful."

"Why were you thankful? Surely they weren't better than you in any way?"

"Maybe she, they, were actually better than me. Anyway, that's not what it's about … it was a chance for a different kind of life, a chance to do it right. But what does it matter now, anyway? I blew my hand and she is gone. In fact, it might have been inevitable right from the start, written into my genetic code."

"I could bring you some Keats, if you like, if that would mean something to you," she said.

"No, I'm done with all that nonsense." I might have sighed as I said this.

“But why?”

“Because that life is over. I know you won’t get it, but it really is over. It’s a million miles away, even though it feels like it is right here.”

“It must be hard for you to have lost all that,” she said. I don’t think it was a question. Surely she could see that I wasn’t exactly happy about where I was in the world? Or maybe she really just didn’t get it; failed to notice that everyone in the hospital had been put there to die, that the only way out was down into the dirt.

“Yes, it was hard,” I said, but from the look of her, I knew she wasn’t quite with me.

That evening I lay on my bed, unable to get Sarah out of my mind. Fragments of memory kept drifting into my head – that day she had read me the poem; other days, at the beach, or at a braai at her brother’s apartment block after watching the rugby on television.

Sarah, here in this place where men cough themselves to death while I lie awake. Sarah in this dark, rotting hospital. Sarah, wandering around like a ghost among the wounded soldiers. Sarah, dead to me, but still in the room . . . Sarah, haunting me as the dead cannot help but haunt the living.

I guess I wrote this in that time before the escape. I'm not sure. I didn't take the trouble to date the things I put down on paper. There was no chronology to how I filled the notebooks. Often I would let one fall open in the middle and start scribbling right there.

In the ruins of an old house I lay my head

By the soft morning to rise

Not to move but to stare

To feel the dust upon my skin

To watch the redness of the world and to wait

For I knew

That soon enough the smell of dust would turn to death

That I'd see her sitting

A skeleton with threaded hairs of dusty sunlight

Or maybe a figure on the ridge in the late afternoon

Stumbling toward me with no purpose

But come to judge

The next morning, I went down to the library. It was deserted, as it often was. When I say library, what I mean is a room containing books. Apart from a few shelves – so overflowing that books often spilled from them – there were two large wooden tables, three wooden chairs, and stacks of cardboard boxes stacked on top of each other. It wasn't exactly the British Library, but it had a charm to it.

Most of the books were shipped to us from various libraries and donors in the weeks after that first escape. Unfortunately, though, the boxes contained mainly romance novels and Christian self-help books. Maybe the outside world thought that all we needed was romance and religion. Maybe they thought that would cure us of the sin that made us sick in the first place.

I had volunteered when they wanted people to help sort out the stacks of donated books. We didn't have a librarian or anything like that. It was strictly a library for and by the people. Well, considering the selection of books, maybe not quite for the people.

Either way, I spent a lot of time there in those days. Partly because something about the dusty air in the library and the smell of books reminded me of Sarah, but also because I started reading a Stephen King book and really liked it. It was about these strange people in yellow suits who were chasing this mysterious guy who could see the future.

That book was from one of two boxes that had some winery's name on them, along with the words "handle with care". Apart from some space westerns, Tom Clancy, and more Stephen King, this is also where I found the first copy of the *Black Dahlia*.

It wasn't the kind of book Sarah would read, but sitting there reading through all those months nevertheless felt a bit like I was spending time with her. Actually, it felt like hanging out in her untouched room after she had died. It may sound depressing, but there was something calming about imagining that she had just recently died and that I was hanging out in her room, something that helped me forget that I was in the middle of nowhere, waiting to die myself.

I opened some boxes and started going through some of those that had never been properly sorted. If there was something, those were the boxes where it would be. Not that I had much hope. I couldn't remember having seen any maps or map books in the library and it wasn't exactly the kind of thing people would have sent us. It was not as if we would be going on sightseeing trips in the area.

I didn't have anything better to do, though. And then, to my surprise, after an hour of glancing over the spines of books, I finally found something. It was a book about the endemic plants of the Karoo and right at the front it had a map indicating major roads and towns. It wasn't very detailed, but I figured it would at least give us some idea of where we were.

I took the book up to the ward to show JD. I was still feeling a bit guilty about not having shown more enthusiasm about his escape plans. I wanted to please him, to show him that I was at least on his side. When I got there, he was asleep, though, which was odd, since he hardly ever slept in the day time.

I watched him lying there, a worried look on his face, as if he was having a nightmare about the end of the world. Every now and again he caught his breath and snorted. I put the book on his bedside table and lay down for a nap myself. When the lunch bell rang, he was still out. I let him be.

After the 600th meatless stew of my time in the hospital, I went to the library and started reading *Out of Sight*, the other book that Miss Van Vuuren had brought me. Aptly, it was about a prison break. I wondered if she had any idea.

When I was about thirty pages in, the door opened and Gerrie from security brought in the newspaper and carefully placed it on one of the tables. He did this every day when he came in for his evening shift. He nodded at me and as he did this, something about his body language made me wonder if he was our inside man. He could very well be, I thought as I watched him quietly close the door behind him, careful not to disturb my reading.

I felt tempted to get up and see if there wasn't some secret message hidden away in the folds of the paper. Maybe this was how they communicated. I toyed with the idea, but I knew it was nonsense. The sad thing was that it would be the easiest thing in the world to catch Gerrie on his way out and have a few quiet words. For all my complaining, we weren't in Alcatraz and no great feats of invention would be required to get us out of the hospital.

Still, things didn't seem quite that simple after all. Later, when I got back to the ward, I found JD pacing up and down with an agitated look about him. I asked him if everything was ok. After all, he had spent the whole day sleeping.

"Yes, yes, sport," he said and looked at me with a zoned-out look in his eyes.

"Did you get the map?" I asked.

"The map? Oh yes. Excellent. Good work, sport."

And then after a moment he said, "We ran into some trouble. We're in a god-damn spot of bother, sport." And then, toning down to a whisper, peeking at the door, "Our inside man has no idea of how to switch off the fence without tripping the alarm. If we can't turn it off, we'll have to go through the gate. Anyway, that's what Mazza is thinking. He wants to go out blazing guns like the last time. He doesn't look like he is going to listen to reason."

"When is this going to happen?" I asked, now also whispering. I kept looking at the door. Talking openly like that was extremely risky.

"Thursday," he said.

"What day is today?" I honestly didn't know. As with everything else about the outside world, I didn't have any use for the days of the week. I hadn't kept count for years.

"Today is Saturday," he said.

"So we're going in less than a week but we don't have any plan beyond getting trigger happy with some water pistols?"

"Well, I'm certainly not going through the gate. We had a plan. Gerrie even managed to smuggle in a wire cutter. Wait till late. Switch off the fence. Cut a hole, and we're out. If the fence could be sorted out, we'd be fine."

It surprised me to see JD all manic like that. I thought I had him figured out better. Usually he'd be the one with the calm, logical answers. That is, after all, why he was chosen to represent us on the committee.

"Simple," I said. "We have to find a way to switch it off. We have to get someone who knows electricity to check out the setup down in the security room. Maybe there is a manual or something? It can't be all that hard."

"Well, that would be very risky. Besides, who do we know that knows about electricity?"

"You're the one who knows everybody. I'm sure you can think of someone. You only need to figure out which switches to flick. How hard could it be?"

"Maybe," he said, shaking his head. Then he left the room muttering something to himself.

As I lay down on my bed that night, my mind kept going over the details of the escape plans. I even felt something like excitement about it. Here was a new adventure taking shape, something to get carried away by – although I knew I wouldn't really get carried away. After all, I was just going along for the ride. I didn't expect to find anything out there. Still, it had the beginnings of a good story.

I was sure the problem with the fence could be sorted out. When I thought of someone sneaking into the security room to check it out, though, I inadvertently reminded myself of my visit to Von Hansmeyer's office. Somehow, I hadn't been

thinking of that strange visit much since I woke up that bleached-out morning with the wind in my ears.

Whatever happened – and I thought of that disconcerting feeling that there was a third person standing behind me in that dim room – none of it seemed to matter. At least not right then. It was as if there was a turning point, as if taking that large white pill had rewound something inside me and given me a new clarity that would help me push on and beyond the cold wire fences.

There was an instinct inside me telling me not to dwell too much on the past, even the recent past, but rather to cling to the white pill's clarity and to leave all that confusion behind me. Still, as I lay thinking about the strange light in Von Hansmeyer's office, I suddenly remembered the man with the scar on his face. I had only seen him that once, as I was looking out of the window while waiting for Miss Van Vuuren. I wondered if he really died. And then I remembered that I had dreamt about him, and then I dreamt about him again.

I was once again in the ballroom. The lavish red curtains still hung as they did before. The finely crafted golden pillars once again impressed me with their fine workmanship. This time, though, the room wasn't filled with dancers. In fact, I was quite alone there.

I walked over to a large window from where cold white daylight streamed into the room. It was a remarkably large window, probably twice my height and easily four metres wide. I stood in front of this window looking out at the falling stow. A hundred metres or so off was the beginnings of a rise in the ground. And there, in a thick, dark green phalanx, stood a thick forest of cedar. The trees stretched far up a hill to where it disappeared in the mist of the falling snow.

I remember feeling a deep sense of wonder at the fact that the world could have changed that much. I didn't question it, though. I accepted the transformation of the

hospital and its surroundings as being simultaneously wonderful and completely unsurprising. Dare I say, it even had a sense of homecoming about it.

At this point, I became aware of a fire crackling in a large fireplace in the wall on the furthest side of the ballroom. Next to it lay piles of wood in a large, golden basket. Some long, silver tools with which to manage the fire hung hooked over the edge of this basket.

Next thing I remember, I was standing by the fire and Miss Van Vuuren was handing me a glass of port. “Come on, Mr. James, lighten up,” she said. She was dressed as before in bright white, her shoulders bare, long white gloves reaching past her elbows.

“You know,” she said, her red lips twisting into a smile, “I’m really glad to see you here. I wasn’t sure you’d come.”

There were other people as well now. Men, all men in black tuxedos, men with finely cropped hair that spoke in what I took to be Polish. Before I could answer her, one of these men took her arm and led her toward another to whom he introduced her. I watched her shake hands with this man and give him a heart-wrenching smile.

She stood talking with these men for a very long time, mostly just nodding and smiling as they explained something to her. I kept thinking that the one might be the broad-shouldered nurse, but I couldn’t be sure. He did, after all, look nothing like him.

I wanted to talk to her, but she kept eluding me. Once I tried to join her circle and a large bearded man stepped in front of me, saying something in Polish which I took to mean “you’d better stay where you are”.

I think I struggled with him, I’m not sure. But the next thing I remember, I was sitting in Von Hansmeyer’s office. Von Hansmeyer was sitting behind his desk, saying something about how I had no business harassing Miss Van Vuuren. I wanted to defend myself, to explain that she was my friend, but he wouldn’t listen. “She is very traumatised,” he said. “Very traumatised. I should be locking you up.”

Then I got that horrible feeling again that there was someone behind me. As I thought this, I saw a thin smile forming on Von Hansmeyer's lips. I wanted to get up or scream or something, but I couldn't. I was stuck there as if I had been paralysed. Von Hansmeyer nodded and said something I couldn't quite make out, and then I got the sense that something was moving behind me, as if a shadow had fallen on my back.

That is when I woke with a shake. It was still dark. It could have been anything from twelve to three. It was that time of night when it is impossible to tell.

I lay for a few minutes, feeling that peculiar combination of relief and loneliness one often feels when lying awake after a nightmare.

And then I stiffened and felt the blood drain from my face, for suddenly I knew, as clearly as one knows anything, that there was in fact someone standing behind me in the dream, and that it was the man with the scar on his face, and that he wasn't thinking kind thoughts.

I was reading in the library the next afternoon when Gerrie came round to drop the paper. When he got to the table, he hesitated for a moment before putting it down. He glanced at me, and immediately looked away when he saw that I was watching.

"It's okay," I said. "I'm not going to read it. I prefer my fiction printed on smaller pages." He turned to me and the muscles in his face stiffened.

I just lowered my eyes and returned to reading my book and pretended he wasn't there anymore. A few seconds later, I heard the door opening and closing and I was alone again. He had left the newspaper lying on the table.

I walked over and folded open the paper. As expected, I could feel an irregular shape within it and soon I had unfolded from it a thin A4 booklet with the words R. McBride Security Systems in small, maroon letters on its cover.

I sat down with both newspaper and security manual on my lap. The manual seemed to have been custom-made for the hospital. Some pages consisted of diagrams of switches and odd words like "line in parabola" and "alarm dispersal calibrator". Apart from the funny words, though, it didn't seem all that complicated. Still, I got why Gerrie felt a bit out of his depth.

The door burst open and Mazza and JD marched in like cops out to apprehend a felon. Mazza looked at me and then at JD. "What's your bitch doing here?" he said.

"Whole thing was his idea," JD said.

"Fuck, I hope we can trust him," Mazza said to JD, but looking at me.

"I see you've already got the paper there, old sport," JD said.

"Yes," I said, "I forgot what happy reading it makes. Famine here, war there, people being raped down the road. It's really quite something."

"I know," he said.

I slid the manual from under a fold of newsprint and held it out to them. Mazza stepped toward me and yanked it out of my hand. He pulled up a chair and sat down by the table, spreading the booklet open in front of him.

We waited, watching the frown crease his forehead like a dirty soccer ball having the air slowly sucked from it. Not seeing an end to this temporary impasse, I turned back to the newspaper and started reading a story about how the country's flood-preparedness plans would be completely useless if we were hit by storms similar to those that had been tormenting the North American coastline. One person they quoted said that they wouldn't be talking about the day the levees broke, because there wouldn't be any levees completed when that day came. And then right at the end of the story they quoted some freak who said that the warming of the planet could still be turned around and that the rising of sea levels could be reversed.

I was about to start reading a second story when Mazza said, "JD, come over here. What does this bit mean?" JD, who had been standing by one of the bookshelves, walked over, leaned down and stared at the page. I could see that he didn't have any idea either. Still, he stood watching for a while, going "mmm . . ." Then he sat down next to Mazza and, pulling the manual over, paged back to the front.

After a while, Mazza sat back in his chair, swinging his arms back and forth over the backrest. "Shit, man. Don't you have some electronics manuals around here?" he asked, looking at me as if I was the official librarian. I thought of saying I'll check our index, but I didn't.

"No, I would have known if there was."

Hunched over the manual, JD was muttering to himself. I got the feeling that he was faking. Mazza tapped on the table with his fingers.

"You need a pro," I said. "Don't you know someone, Mazza?" I think it was the first time I had ever said his name to him. After a moment of thinking, he said no.

“I think you are right,” JD said. “I can’t figure this out. We’ll have to find someone. Someone in this damn hospital must know how to work this stuff.”

“Someone we can trust,” Mazza said firmly.

The mood had changed from excitement to frustration. They threw around names for a while, until Mazza got up and said, “Fuck, ladies, I’ll deal with this later,” and left.

Later that night, though, JD did think of someone, a bony old man called Lance Johannes, who had a single thick hair protruding from his nose and spent most of his days lying in bed. He was not the kind of person one ever thought of: He was old, quiet and sicker than most. But, as I would learn in time, he had spent all of his adult life working for the Port Elizabeth municipality, laying wires and installing fibre optics in the city’s never-completed attempt to create a technological hub in the Eastern Cape.

Johannes didn’t have the reputation of a man who would split on us, but we didn’t really know. He certainly wasn’t coming out with us. Still, we had no choice but to get him involved.

The next day JD and I went to see him. He was in a ward on the furthest side of the hospital where most of the older patients were kept. If our wing of the place still had some life about it, that place was like the waiting room at the gates of hell. Not only did they have a much faster turnover in bodies, they also looked and sounded sicker.

Seeing older people wasting away like that made me hope that I wouldn’t be one of the few whose bodies managed to fight the bug off, year after year. Rather die right away than end up a coughing mannequin like that.

We found Johannes lying in bed, his breathing loud and irregular through his nose, his face rubbery and dry. As we said hello to him, his psoriatic eyelids opened slowly like that of a geriatric cat.

Before anyone could say anything, a small, large-eyed man whom we had never seen before slid out of the other bed in the ward and came toward us, hand outstretched.

We shook his hand and he smiled toothlessly at us, his large eyes going from me to JD and then back to me. His eyes rested on me with a peculiar intensity, as if he was expecting something from me. The freak made me feel positively uneasy.

"Can't speak," Johannes grunted. "I think someone cut his tongue out. Sold it for muti."

"Can you understand us?" JD asked the little man.

"He only understands some Afrikaans," Johannes said. ""I think he came from a farm around here. As far as I can tell, anyway. They probably kept him on as their little boesman slave."

At the word "boesman", the man's eyes darted to Johannes and then back to us. It was the first sign of understanding that we saw from him.

"In this day and age," JD said with what sounded like real surprise. "What is his name?"

"Boesman."

Boesman may have looked a bit odd, with his loose-fitting standard issue, his small frame, and his toothless grin, but he didn't look stupid. And the way he came forward to shook our hands and then stood up straight, looking from one to the other, had a self-assuredness about it that wasn't what one would expect from an abused slave. He also didn't seem very sick at all, just old.

Something felt wrong to me. The whole situation with this odd little man seemed to be just too absurd. I wondered about this for a moment. Maybe they were about to burst out laughing, pointing their rotting fingers at us, showing us their toothless mouths.

JD didn't seem to have any doubts, though. "I understand you worked with electronics and wires and things?" he asked the man in the bed.

“You could say that. I laid cables once. Why?”

“We need you to help us make sense of some drawings.”

“Maybe. What’s in it for me?”

“What would you like to be in it?”

“Brandy.”

“I’m sure we can organise that.”

“Okay,” Johannes said, “We have us a deal.”

On the way back, JD seemed strangely excited about having found the old man. He couldn’t stop talking about it. There was something manic about him – the look in his eyes, the gestures. Maybe it was just another sign of how he was unhinging in that time, how he was getting ready for his big exit. I had never seen him so carried away.

Me, well, I was already bored with the logistics of escaping. I wouldn’t have minded forgetting all about it until the hole was blown open and all I had to do was walk out.

Maybe it was inevitable that something would go wrong between me and the redhead. Maybe I brought it on, knowing that I was soon going to slip the fence. No, it was more than that. I had subconsciously manufactured it that way. I had to make a clean break, to leave it all behind. I couldn't take her with me when we escaped. For the escape to mean anything, I had to come clean and then I had to cut all ties with my hospital-self. I had to cleanse what there was left in me to cleanse, so that I could go into that nothingness vacant and pure.

That last time in the dusty office next to Von Hansmeyer's, we'd been talking about how the pills made me tired, when she suddenly changed the subject. "Last time you told me about Sarah," she said. "What you didn't tell me, is what went wrong. From the way you spoke, it sounds as if you had a real connection with her." She was in a serious mood again, her hair combed back and her eyes large and quietly intense.

"I suppose we did have something," I said. "There were some times. There were long afternoons, the beach on one occasion, a bookshop, that day she read me the poem, but no, no we were never really all that close, even though it seemed that way. It was all a big charade, a glimpse into another world. Just a little teaser, before it all came crashing down again."

"But why did it come crashing down? Was she in an accident? Was she sick?" she asked softly.

"No, I guess you could say she chose to go. Or you could say she was encouraged to go."

"You mean suicide, Barry?"

I looked past her, out the window. Beyond the fence, the Karoo lay dead and hard. I thought of what it would be like to be out there. Then I looked back at her.

"As I said, she was of a class above me. She was going places. I knew her family tried to like me, but it must have been obvious to them that I wasn't good enough for her. Anyway, none of that would have mattered if she hadn't got pregnant."

"How did you feel about that?"

"Oh, I wanted her to get an abortion, but she didn't want to. I don't know, things got sour. We had some arguments. I think I might have shoved her once. What I didn't know, was that she didn't have anywhere to run. She never even told her parents about the pregnancy. They only heard about it afterwards . . . Her brother pulled me aside at work one day and told me that she had taken pills. Just like that, out of the blue. That was probably about two months after the last time I had seen her."

She sat quietly taking it all in. I couldn't tell what the look in her eyes meant, but I didn't much care. I'd never told anyone the story before, and here I was telling it to this innocent little shrink . . . and for what? Maybe I just felt like telling it to someone, so I could leave that behind as well when I slipped past the sentries.

"Funny thing was," I went on, "that until her brother told me what she had done, I hadn't really felt the break-up that bad. I mean, the relationship was so unreal that I wasn't all torn up about it. I even went on a few dates with a girl who was a waitress across the street from where I worked. Once the mama's boy told me, though, that she was dead, I couldn't stand this new girl anymore, poor thing. It was the end for me. So that is it. I've regretted it so much, I'm all out of whatever it is we use when we regret things."

"I'm so sorry, Barry," she whispered.

"Oh, well . . ."

We shared another long silence. I looked out at the pale sky behind her. It seemed windy out there. Then I stared down at the tabletop between us. I stretched out my hand and ran my finger along the small grooves in the wood.

“It was my one chance at a real life, my one chance of something different . . . so I deserve all that’s coming to me. It is my punishment. God’s verdict.”

“You think God is punishing you?”

“Yes, that is why my lungs are filled with pus, why all this is here,” I said and indicated the hospital around me. “The details of infection don’t matter. I was judged and I deserve all that’s coming to me.”

She looked at me with a questioning look in her eyes, but she didn’t say anything. We sat in silence for a long time. For some reason my mind drifted off to the white pill that Von Hansmeyer had given me. I thought of how clean it had made me feel.

“I think I’ve said everything I needed to say to you,” I said. “You can go write it all in your report now.”

“I think we have a lot more to talk about,” she said softly. “There is a lot for you to work through.”

“I’m done working through it,” I said. “This was it. It is over now. I can bury my secrets here with you. You can write it up as a dead man’s history in your report, and I can forget all about it.”

“Barry, you have been doing very well. But you have to keep going. You can do it at your own speed, it doesn’t matter.”

She was trying to chain me down, to tie me to the weight I had just thrown off. But no, I thought of that large white pill and the emptiness beyond the fence, and I felt her grip loosen, I felt the chains slacken. And then I thanked her for what she had done for me, and said that I had to go.

So I got up and left her sitting there, like I’d done the day we met.

I felt strangely exposed for the next few days. At any moment I expected police cars to come over the ridge or for Von Hansmeyer to call me into his office to tell me I was being transferred. But my past didn't catch up with me. She didn't split.

All this time I tried not to think of her. I knew that it was over, but the end had seemed so random. It had no closure to it. No dramatic exit. To hell with all of it though. My business was elsewhere, in as far as I had business left in this world.

As I opened the library door, there was a rustle of activity followed by an unnatural silence. JD sat with the paper wide open in front of him, half obscuring the old man behind him. The old man seemed to be reading a motoring supplement folded open on the table in front of him. But from the over-elaborate way he was turning his head and letting his eyes drift from side to side, it was clear that he was pretending.

I closed the door behind me and asked JD how they were doing.

"Getting there," he said.

Johannes had shifted the motoring supplement aside again and was looking down at two pages of diagrams. With a small pencil the old man had made a few notes next to the undecipherable sketches.

"I need to see the rest," he said in a loud voice.

"Keep it down," JD said, and I could see that he was nervous. He did give him some more pages, though.

"I know it is the alarm," the old man said. "I am not that stupid. I know what you are doing."

"Well, just tell us how to switch it off then," JD said.

"I'll tell you, but first I want to see the brandy."

At this, JD got up and went looking for Mazza who had promised to get hold of some. “Keep an eye on him, Barry,” he told me as he left. I sat listening to the old man’s loud breathing. Then I picked up *Out of Sight* and continued reading where I had left off the previous day. Sitting there reading wasn’t the same, though, with the old man there. His raspy breathing cut like a chainsaw through the silence. As in his ward, a sickly smell of stale urine hung about him like a poisoned halo.

I felt him looking at me and raised my eyes from the book. We sat looking at each other for a while. Oddly enough, there wasn’t anything uncomfortable about us looking at each other like that. It felt like meeting someone I had known for years, someone whom I was perfectly comfortable with. “You know there is nothing out there,” he said eventually, his eyes as clear as I had ever seen them. “All of it is coming to an end.”

“I know.”

“But still you are planning to escape?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“It is something to do.”

“Ah. Well, we’ll all soon be dead anyway. Wouldn’t matter then. I thought you might have family or something you want to go see.”

“No, nothing like that.”

“If I escaped I would go see my wife in PE. Not that she’d want to see me.” He laughed as he said this, and the single thick hair that sprouted from his left nostril seemed to quiver as he did so.

Then he looked back down at the papers spread out in front of him. Apparently he had said what he wanted to. I didn't feel like reading any more, though. So I just sat there waiting for JD to come back.

"This is a strange machine," he said, to himself more than to me. "Maybe it can't be switched off."

I didn't say anything, but just sat watching him and wondering how odd it was that I was now in the role of the jailer, the one having to watch over another. Had he tried to leave, I would have stopped him. I would have stood by the door and refused to let him out. I don't know what I would have done had he shouted, but I certainly wouldn't have made it easy for him. We had embarked upon a course, and even though I had my reservations about our destination, I wasn't going to let him derail our plans.

As the light that fell through the window started fading, I felt myself getting impatient. We couldn't sit here all night. We'd have to switch on the light, and then a guard or a nurse would certainly look in.

After a chapter or so of reading in the fading light, Mazza flung open the door with JD following behind him. They walked up to Johannes, stopped in front of him, and Mazza said, "So, old man, how do we beat the alarm?" As he said this, he produced a bottle containing a golden brown liquid from underneath his shirt. Even though it looked turgid, the old man's eyes were drawn to this bottle as if it was his recently born child. Mazza held it out to him, but pulled it back as he reached out for it. "Don't be greedy now, old man."

"I've almost got it. You see, these sketches you gave me aren't very good," Johannes said.

"They are all we have. You don't get nothing until you tell us what to do," Mazza said, pulling up a chair.

He sat down and for a while everyone watched Johannes as he sat bent over the sheets of paper. He coughed a deep guttural cough and wiped a slimy hand on his pants.

"He says it might not be possible to switch it off," I said after a while, for no reason except I was getting bored, and a little agitated over the fact that my evening read had been spoiled by their intrusion.

"Did you say that?" Mazza said, looking at the old man.

"I might have. You never know, the way they make machines today anything is possible."

"Of course you can turn it off. Don't be silly," JD said.

Then I said that when we are all dead the machines may still be going, keeping the fences electrified with solar-powered currents. At this the old man looked at me and bowed his head theatrically.

Mazza started tapping his fingers on the table, and by the stern look on his face I knew better than to keep talking. It was almost dark now, and we knew that the bell would be ringing soon.

We sat in silence while Johannes looked at the papers and scribbled things in the margins.

Mazza sat with his chin in his hands, looking worried.

"I'd have to see the actual installation," Johannes said. "These diagrams are all very generic. But if you want, I can try to explain."

"Ok, old man, explain," Mazza said, once again taking the small bottle with the brown liquid out and putting it on the table with his hand resting on it possessively.

"Look at this," he said and pointed at one of the shapes on the page. "This is the alarm switch. I don't think it will be visible, though. There is probably some electronics

connected to it requiring a code. No biggie, though, if you open the box you should see something like this." He pointed to a diagram. "You want to cut that wire. Once that is done, you can switch off the current. There should be a marked switch for that, like this."

At which he drew a squiggle-like shape.

"That simple?" Mazza asked.

"Yes," the old man said, lingering on the S.

"And what about the cameras?" JD asked.

"Cameras? Simple, you switch off the lights at the back of the hospital. No light, no cameras. Do I have to spell everything out to you?" As he said this, he reached for the bottle.

Mazza let him have it.

We sat watching him as he opened it and took a large swig. Then he coughed, splattering all over the papers.

"Fuck, man!" Mazza said.

But the old man was already getting up. "If you will excuse me, gentlemen, I need to get back to bed. I've had enough of this wild goose chase." He stumbled out of the room unsteadily, holding the bottle tightly under his shirt.

There are many different kinds of waiting. Some drive you crazier than others.

Sitting by my ward window, looking out at the dead, radiated world, I had been keeping myself busy with the kind of waiting where you wait, but with no idea how long you have to wait for. I knew that death would eventually come, and I could feel it weighing down my limbs at times, but for all its daily companionship it could have been two weeks away or two years. That kind of waiting I could make peace with.

That Monday morning, however, the world outside my window had a different look to it. It might have been as dead as always, but there seemed to lurk some promise of change out among the fence poles, out there where the dust snaps at the soles of men. Out there was some kind of freedom. What it would be like, I had little notion of. I knew that it would not be the wonderful future any of the others were imagining. Still, it lay out there like a large, undefined shape buried in the dry, red earth, waiting to be dug up.

It wasn't only that there was a different shade of grey on the horizon. As I sat there, I knew we would take our first stab at this new creature in three days' time. I felt it coming nearer, like you feel the earth rumbling when there's a train in the distance. The clock was ticking, and for the first time in years the passing of time meant something to me. This kind of waiting was much more disconcerting.

I knew that my days of sitting by the window staring at the nothingness would soon be over. Even if we failed, life wouldn't be the same. In fact, things had already changed. But, until Thursday night came, I could imagine that I was still in that half-dead world I had been in for the preceding three years, that twilight world that I had made peace with. Not that I would have called what I felt nostalgia. After all, I would as soon see the hospital burnt to the ground and say to hell with it . . . and so too to that husk of a man who lived there and answered to my name.

Still, three years was a long time and a lot had happened, even though nothing had really happened. And even if there was nothing worth holding on to, the letting go still felt oddly unnatural. Something of the place was clinging to me like molten tar clings to your shoes.

So I sat there looking out across the wires to the ridge, and then back down to where four cars stood parked over to the left. A soft breeze was covering them in a fine dust that was visible even from that distance. They would all need washing soon. I thought of what it was like to sit in a car and to look through a dusty window like that, with the sun catching the dirt particles, hiding the world in an orange blur. It stirred a memory from way back, but I decided to let it go. I wasn't interested in memories anymore.

Furthest to the left was parked the small, white Hyundai. I hadn't noticed it earlier. Somehow, while I was staring out of the window, she must have driven down the path that led down from the ridge, parked her car, and walked over to the front entrance, all without me noticing a thing. Maybe a dust cloud obscured her car, I told myself. Maybe she had, through some kind of sorcery, managed to slip by like a ghost.

I thought that, as I sat there, she was in the hospital, probably talking to some poor sod who couldn't keep his eyes off her. Then I thought that I probably wouldn't ever talk to her again, that she was one of the things I was leaving behind. For all the cleansing that had come to me, this was the one thing that remained to be exorcised. One cannot cling to the impossible.

It is better you broke it off, I told myself. Getting away from those odd, torturous sessions was all part of my cleansing, of my process of getting myself ready to leave the hospital behind. I couldn't cling to that mental patient self now, even if some part of me desperately wanted to be back in that room with her. Sitting there looking out of the window, for the first time I felt I could really trust her.

At the same time, though, I knew the futility of it. That door had closed and I had accepted it.

I lay down and slept fitfully for a few hours. Even though I had been doing better since I swallowed Von Hansmeyer's large, white pill, I was still pretty sick, and there was no way to forget it.

When I got up, there were only three cars parked outside. “Okay, now that’s over too,” I said to myself. I thought of how she was no longer in the hospital, but how she had recently still been there, and how something of her must still be lingering.

Still sleepy, I got up and trudged down the corridor toward Von Hansmeyer’s office. As I came closer, I could hear voices inside. I walked past and carefully pushed open the door of the room next to his where I had spoken with Miss Van Vuuren. The same table and chairs still stood there. I couldn’t help but stare at the table top as I had done when I was there with her. The walls were as bare as ever. I was sure that I could detect the faintest smell of her sweet perfume hanging in the air. I breathed in deeply and listened to that familiar silence once more. The air made my head dizzy.

I stood for a moment wondering what I was doing there. Then I told myself it was okay, she was gone. I wasn’t betraying myself. I wasn’t slipping back into the world of wanting and needing things.

I stood by the window and looked out at the broken-down garden wall where I’d seen the man with the scar. There was no one down there. Then I looked up at the fence and at the spot by the corner post where JD had told me of their escape plans. I was probably standing in the very window from which she and Von Hansmeyer had stood watching us.

I tried to imagine what the two of us would have looked like out there – JD waving defiantly, me just standing there. Whichever way I pictured it, we made a sorry sight.

Those last few days passed without anything much happening. At least, there was nothing much that I was involved with. As I say, the logistics of escaping didn't really interest me. Ours was not to be a heroic Dirty Dozen job. After all, Pearson was no Alcatraz.

At some point, Gerrie apparently clicked that after the escape he'd be left sitting in the security hub with a cut wire and a large "guilty" sign around his neck. He was on the point of pulling out of the whole thing altogether. Somehow, though, they made a deal. My guess is that Mazza knew someone on the outside who was either threatening Gerrie and his family, or offering them a briefcase stuffed with cash.

The new deal was that there would be a decoy. Nothing major, just a noisy patient strolling out the front door. Gerrie would go see what was up and some of the nurses or the guard at the gate would see him confronting the decoy, which would give him his alibi. As soon as he was out of the security hub, Mazza was to slip in and cut the wire.

JD said that Mazza and Sibu spent a lot of time in that last week up in the old man's room at the dead-end of the hospital, talking about electronics and the like. I didn't know it then, but they were also grooming the old man to be their decoy. Knowing how much doubt he had, they must have promised him more brandy than he could possibly drink in the little time he had left.

If the wire cutting worked, and there was no alarm and no current, the deal was that we would wait a while till things calmed down again. We figured no-one would notice that the wires were dead. Then, Gerrie would flick the switch for the security lights that lit up the back fence, and Mazza and Sibu would run off to cut a hole.

As plans go, it didn't seem particularly good or foolproof to me. Still, given the general air of indifference that hung around the hospital, chances were that nothing more would be needed.

So it happened then that late that Thursday night JD woke me up, violently shaking me by the shoulders. "Come, Barry," he whispered impatiently. I felt drowsy, but I got up. I dressed in the dark and before I could think any further he grabbed me by the arm and pulled me toward the door. “Things are falling apart,” he whispered. “We don’t have much time.”

We walked barefoot down the corridor toward the stairs, our shoes in our hands, pillowcases with our meagre provisions slung over our shoulders. We paused and listened. Nothing. Then we tiptoed down to the landing. I stopped at the window from where I had once watched Mazza and Tumi trying to fight each other to death, despite being too weak to do so.

The backyard was dark. It was the first time I had seen it that way since the new security systems were installed. So, the plan seems to be working, I thought. Maybe JD was just putting on when he said that things were falling apart.

When we got to the bottom, we stood against the wall and waited. We could see a light from the nurses’ office in the front. Apart from the wind, there was no sound. Feeling that it was safe enough, we slipped across the wide downstairs passage and into the dining hall with its quiet rows of tables and chairs.

Then I saw it, and with a shock of nausea I knew what had JD so spooked. In a doorway that led from the dining hall to one of the back storerooms a dark shape lay motionless on the floor. It looked like a pile of blankets, except that blankets wouldn’t be arranged like that.

There was a puddle and a smell that I recognized as blood.

I couldn’t help watching. Then suddenly I felt as if the blood had stopped coursing through my veins. My pulse faded like the drums at the end of a song on the radio. Maybe I was ready to vomit out Von Hansmeyer’s pill now, to go back up to my ward and to accept whatever was to come.

But JD shouted a whisper from where he was busy climbing out through an open window.

So I turned and walked over to the back of the dining hall where the breeze was blowing in. As I looked outside, something seemed odd to me; and then suddenly I realized once again, as if for the first time, that the lights that lit up the back fence were switched off. It seemed very strange to me.

I climbed out the window and found JD and five or six other men waiting for us. We sat on our haunches leaning against the wall that still had some of the day's heat lingering in it. We waited.

In the dark, about 50 metres off, we could just make out some movement. We strained our ears and listened, but it was quiet. Then, far off, we heard a soft clicking as Mazza and Sibu started to cut the wires.

We waited and it was quiet again. Behind us, the hospital stood cold and heavy. We heard someone coughing up in one of the wards and the coughing didn't stop. I couldn't help feeling a bit guilty for all the men we were leaving behind.

"Let's go," JD said. "I think they're through. No use waiting for the signal."

He got up and, bent over, he led us across the backyard toward the hole in the fence. We found it and squeezed through one by one.

I glanced back at the hospital, its shape silhouetted against the bright spotlights at the front entrance.

"Come on, don't get nostalgic now," JD said and started off due north. I followed him and so did some of the others.

He ran at a leisurely pace with long, light strides. Even so, I found myself tiring quite quickly. I have no idea where he found the stamina and even less of an idea how I managed to keep up with that dark figure moving on and on in front of me.

After what felt like an hour, but probably was much less, we came to a slight rise in the land. When we got over it, the earth fell away again in front of us and the dead flat plain stretched out into the distance.

When we had gone a few steps down the slope, JD stopped and slumped down on the ground. He was out of breath, wheezing with that strange mechanical whirr he made when sleeping. "We're out of sight," he said.

I plonked down next to him and looking back could see nothing but for the rise we'd just crossed. There were no more lights, no hospital.

A half moon floated a few inches above the horizon to the east as if it was a night like any other. The breeze was picking up now and far to the west there was a thick bank of intense darkness that I took to be clouds.

"I wonder if Mazza and Sibu found their lift," said Meintjies, who had also managed to keep up. No-one answered. JD, Meintjies, McKenzie and I sat like this for a while, listening to each other struggling to breathe.

Then we heard the rhythmic thud of footsteps and held our breaths. We heard it coming closer. About fifty meters off to the west, we saw a figure dressed in white, little more than a shadow barely lighter than the ink blotch night around him, running on toward the north. We saw him fall and curse and then get up again and continue.

None of us said anything.

We sat like that for a while waiting for the pain in our lungs to subside. I took a swig of water and wondered why I hadn't brought more. I only had the two one-litre plastic milk bottles, and how long would that last me?

Then, over the soft swishing of the breeze, we suddenly heard the distant police siren of the hospital alarm. It sounded closer than I thought it should. Any moment now they'll be on us, I thought. There was, after all, a dead man back there.

"Okay, I think our best chance is to go north east from here," JD said, looking up at the stars. He had traced this route for me on the map the previous day. "Straight northward to get away from the hospital and then north east to shake off our pursuers."

It wasn't the shortest route to a road, but that would be too dangerous. In any case, it wouldn't be easy for a bunch of guys like us to get picked up. And now with the corpse, there was bound to be road blocks. JD's plan was to keep going north east until we hit the national road. Here the odds of being picked up by the cops were much less, while we'd have a better chance of finding a friendly trucker. Only problem was that the map was very rough and we didn't really know how far it was to the national road or what kind of terrain we would have to cross. But JD had said that we'd just have to deal with that when we got there.

Having established which way was north east, he put his head down and started walking at a brisk pace. I followed a few paces behind him and behind me I heard McKenzie, who kept coughing, and far behind him I heard the alarm which seemed to be getting shriller and shriller.

The earth was hard underfoot and, apart from stumbling over the occasional shrub, the going was good. We were crossing one of those unnaturally flat pieces of Karoo. Ahead of us, it was hard to judge how far, there lay, dimly outlined in the faint moonlight, a few small koppies. I felt that once we got there we'd be safe.

As we walked, I heard a man shouting far off in the distance. I don't know if any of the others heard it. If they did, they didn't show it. We just kept walking. Whoever it was, fellow escapee or pursuer, we couldn't afford to get sidetracked.

I did look around, though, and far away I could see the lights of the hospital, a halo in a sea of darkness. For a moment I saw in front of me the scene in the mess hall, now with long fluorescent lights on and cops taking fingerprints. I shook the thought out of my head. Got to keep going, I thought, and tried to banish the image by focussing on the dark koppies looming up ahead of us.

To our left, the bank that had been building on the horizon had grown into a dark mass of cloud that was heading straight for us. Out there on that flat piece of earth, looking at that approaching wall of moisture, I felt aware of my place in the physical world, as I hadn't done for a long time. I knew that those clouds were blowing over from the west coast, that the cold front must have hit Cape Town earlier that day, and that it was drifting over a continuous mass of land to this place in the Eastern Cape, where I was edging my way up

It dawned on me that we were out. We had escaped. For the first time in over three years, I was outside that cursed little square of land. I was back in the real world. Soon there would be cars and trucks and people going about their business.

I felt exhilarated. I had forgotten what the world was like, lost track of the texture of things. As I was walking, it started streaming back. It was as if long dead tracts of memory were rising from the ashes. The taste and colour of things were coming back to me. Not that I didn't have memories before, it was just that they were distant and detached, as if I was watching a movie of my life. Out there on that flat stretch of dirt, I felt as if I could blow new life into those memories, as if being out would give me the key with which to unlock those fragments and breathe the right kind of life into them so that I could see them in their rightful place.

But even as I felt all this, my lungs were burning in a way that suggested to me that they were being torn apart. With each breath, their wounds gaped a bit wider. There was no stopping, though.

I could hear JD wheezing in front of me. Had I not known it was him, I might have been frightened of him, a dark figure like that, head bent over, breathing like a bloodthirsty ghoul. He just kept going, though. I don't know if we would have had it in us to keep going if he wasn't out there leading the way.

"Lights! Jesus!" I heard Meintjies say from somewhere behind me, a bit too loud for my liking. I looked back and far behind us I saw a few small lights moving on the

plain. We stood looking at those pinpricks of light for a few moments. Then, over the gentle tugging of the breeze, I heard the distant barking of dogs.

"They've got dogs," I said. We stood listening, but none of the others could hear them.

"Are you sure?" JD said. "You're not imagining it?" There was a note of panic in his voice which made me want to distrust myself. I knew what I heard, though. He swore and spat out something that dropped onto the ground with a horrible plop.

We set off again, and this time at a much brisker pace. It was still just a walk, but it was as much as our sickly, over-stretched bodies could handle. As before, we moved in silence, but something felt different now. My heart beat as it had when we first heard the alarm starting up.

Again the dogs barked in the distance, a wild, crazy barking, as if they had smelled blood. I had no idea how far away they were. It crossed my mind that they must have caught someone, or maybe, maybe they were on our trail. Maybe they were closing in and soon the flashlights would move in on us and the game would be up.

I didn't look back. In front of me, JD didn't look either. I got the feeling that if any of us dropped, he would leave us behind without a second thought.

A long, tense walk later, we reached the first of the koppies. Up close, it looked a lot different. It stood there, set in the flatness around it like a massive tortoiseshell the size of a large house. I looked back and could still see lights moving. There was no way of telling which way they were going.

JD kept on walking toward a second and a third koppie. In all, there were probably about five of them clustered there. Then, JD stopped and looked around, and asked me what I thought. When I finally had the breath to speak, I said that I couldn't go any further.

"Neither can I, sport," he said.

We found a spot against one of the steeper slopes near the foot of a koppie. We lay down on our backs in the sand between the small, hard shrubs. From our resting place, the view back toward the hospital was obscured by the first koppie we had passed. We couldn't see the lights of whatever authority was chasing us, and if we were still there by first light, they wouldn't see us either. It was about as safe as we could get right then. Which is not to say that the dogs wouldn't take our trail and lead them straight to us. But if we were lucky, they'd sniff out one of the other groups instead. It was a chance we had no choice but to take.

We lay there, listening to each other struggling to breathe. It was a peculiar jumble of wheezing, snores, and murmuring coughs. I couldn't help but laugh at the absurdity of it. When McKenzie asked what I was laughing at, I told him, and he also started laughing. Laughing and coughing, in a way that soon changed from funny to macabre.

And then, as our breathing slowly calmed down, we just lay there, the sky turning above us, a million stars, just as it had always been. Not that we were in the ideal condition to appreciate it.

I heard Meintjies getting up and walking off to go vomit somewhere where we wouldn't smell it. His body wasn't taking the escape very well at all.

I wasn't feeling too great myself. As so many times before in the ward, I felt my limbs grow leaden, as if death itself was weighing them down. This time, though, it was accompanied by a fire in my lungs that just wouldn't go out, a fire that reached up my throat like an eager vine of acid intent on smothering me. Instead of blowing fire, though, I coughed pathetic smatterings of blood.

Still, looking back, maybe that was, after all, the ideal time to see a perfect sky like that. For all our physical discomfort, we were newly freed men. We had been given a reprieve, and maybe more so than for anyone else, being out there meant something to us.

I didn't know the names of the constellations hanging above us in that place. Still, they seemed clearer to me than they had ever been before. An obscure message was written up there in those hieroglyphic pinpoints. Whatever it was, though, was wholly unfathomable to mortal men like us.

I heard the familiar wheeze of JD's snoring. Out in the open, it sounded different, somehow less menacing than before. To the other side of me, McKenzie was lying very still. He must have been sleeping as well. I lifted myself up on my elbows and I saw Meintjies sitting cross-legged some thirty metres off and thought that I didn't really have any idea who he was.

I lay back down again and watched as the clouds slowly moved across above us, obscuring the stars. The breeze was much stronger now and I knew that soon we might feel the large, warm drops of a Karoo rainstorm. We wouldn't have anywhere to hide. But that hardly mattered.

Eventually, I must have drifted off. I remember coming to with JD standing over me. "Come on, sport," he said. "We got to get going."

I shivered. I felt the soft moistness of the earth, and then the clammy clinging of my clothes on my skin. I sat up. Toward the east, the first grey stain of daylight was already discolouring the last remaining clouds and the irregular strips of sky between them. Almost four o'clock, I thought.

We'd been lucky. We had made it through the night. The dogs hadn't stumbled upon our sleeping bodies. We weren't woken up with flashlights stuck in our faces. And with the rain that fell during the night, there was a good chance that our tracks might have been washed away, the last wire that connected us with that place. Cut. Leaving us free to drift off. Maybe luck was on our side, after all.

I reached into the pillowcase I was using for a bag and pulled out a deformed slice of dry bread I had stolen from the previous evening's dinner table. I ate it slowly. My throat felt thick and swollen. I could hardly get it down without water.

I watched JD standing talking to Meintjies, who was still sitting slumped in the exact same spot where I had seen him before I fell asleep. JD held out a hand. Meintjies took it and let JD pull him up.

"Okay, we're going," JD said as he came walking toward me, and once again we were on our way.

We emerged from the cluster of koppies onto another large, flat plain. This one did have some slight dips here and there, but there didn't seem to be any more koppies in sight. "We'd better move quickly," JD said. "There will be no place for us to hide once the sun comes up."

The smell of rain still lingered in the air, even though the last clouds would soon be gone. It couldn't have rained much, though. Beneath the softly discoloured surface, the earth was still as hard and dry as before. In that chilly pre-dawn, though, there lingered something pure and mystical, like a mist that had drifted in from another world. Something you wanted to suck deep into your lungs and hang on to for later.

As we walked, the light slowly flooded the sky, and it seemed too soon when the first bright shards of yellow sunlight flashed over the horizon.

After about two hours of fast walking, we stopped and drank some water. We had been going north east all the while. In the direction from where we came, we could see the koppies, sticking out of the plain like the half-buried eggs of some giant bird. There was no sign of anyone following us.

I stood looking at the horizon around us. Then I saw a slight blip in the skyline to the east. I was looking straight into the sun, so it was hard to see, but there did seem to be a short vertical line, a line where sky met land that seemed just too straight to be the random creation of nature.

I pointed it out to JD and he stood watching with his hand over his eyes. "What do you think? Is it a building?" he asked.

"I don't know. Doesn't look like a building, but doesn't look natural either. Maybe it is a wall."

"I think we should check it out. There might be people there, but what the heck. We can be careful."

"It wouldn't take us closer to the road, though," I said, seeing our progress on the map bending into a line running parallel to the N20 to the north.

"I know," JD said with a hint of impatience, "But we're going to need shelter soon. I don't want to die out here in this godforsaken place."

And that was that. We adjusted our course from north east to east and headed for that point just to the left of the rising sun. Whatever it was we were moving toward, it remained a small kink on the horizon for a very long time. Whether it was very far or whether we were just moving very slowly, I couldn't tell.

Then it was morning and the sun was high and merciless, beating down on us with a nuclear hatred so intense, I could feel my skin turning papery in its glare. Whatever moisture there'd been earlier in the day had, by then, been sucked from the earth. And gradually I felt my limbs once again getting heavier and heavier. I felt my mind narrow. Whereas I could think clear thoughts earlier in the day, all my mind did now was focus on JD's form in front of me and to tell my body to keep going. For all the openness around me, I had descended into a burning hot tunnel.

I was right there in that impersonal burial yard of the gods that I had looked upon so many times from my ward window. But whereas that image had a fence, a ridge, and a road, the one I was in had none of those. It was just hard, indifferent waste.

At one point I thought I heard gun shots in the distance. I glanced at the others, but no-one else seemed to have noticed. I figured I must have imagined it. They wouldn't really be hunting the escapees down like dogs, would they? They wouldn't have to. No point in mentioning what I thought I heard, I told myself.

Trudging on was all I could do. As I walked, I sucked the last drops of water from my first bottle and dropped it in the veld. We hadn't even been gone twelve hours, and already my supplies had been halved and I was on the verge of collapse.

With every step further away from the hospital, I felt the fatigue getting worse. It crossed my mind that we might have sinned against some god of this land, that by crawling through that fence we had brought shame upon ourselves. We'd be cursed to wander about and die out in the wilderness.

By about midday, it had become clear that what we had seen was the remains of a building. We couldn't yet make out much more than that, but there certainly wasn't any life around. JD put his hand up when we were about five hundred metres away. We stood and watched for a while. The land here rose and fell softly like large, flat waves.

The wall of the building was the only straight line. There was no smoke, no colour, and no movement. "Okay then, let's take a look," JD said, and we followed him.

About a hundred metres from the building, we came upon an old dirt road. It was little more than some lines of eroded topsoil and an absence of Karoo shrubs that happened to take the shape of a road, but there it was. It led straight toward the building. In the other direction, to our left, the road disappeared between two low swells, no doubt on its way to the N20 to the north.

We continued down the road and soon found ourselves standing in front of the dilapidated remains of a building. The kink we had seen on the horizon was only one side of it. It had no roof and there were just holes where windows had once been.

It was just a set of walls, some already breaking apart, shaped into two large rooms, empty inside but for bits of rubble and a hard clay floor with cracks like crow's feet.

The four of us collapsed in a thin strip of shade against one of the inside walls. I closed my eyes and wished for the wind to start blowing again. There would be no more

wind, though. From years of looking out of the ward window I knew that the rain of the previous night was already more than what we could ever have asked for. If there was to be mercy, that had been it.

I couldn't help but reach for my remaining water bottle. Just lightly I let the water soothe the surface of my parched lips and mouth. I knew that I should keep it for later, but I couldn't help myself. The feeling of it felt sweeter than the sweetest sin. I wanted to throw my head back and drink large gulps full and then let the remainder run out over my face.

But I didn't. I looked up at the pale-blue sky and I felt my sense of balance leaving my body. So I closed my eyes and tried to shut out the world. But even with my eyes closed, it was as if my retinas had sucked up the day's glare and were now radiating it back into my eyeballs. My whole body felt like that, a dried up sponge saturated with sunlight. I'm sure if the world suddenly went dark I would sit there, glowing like a tired firefly.

I don't know if I slept. It could be that I just zoned out into that half-waken sunstroke world where clocks slow down and speed up with no predictability whatsoever.

I remember later noticing that McKenzie and Meintjies weren't there. The shadow along the wall had shifted, but the day was still mercilessly hot.

"Where are they?" I asked JD. He was sitting a few steps away, his eyes open, his head propped against the wall behind him. With his uncombed hair he looked more ragged than I had ever seen him. Maybe we could pass ourselves off as bums when we reached the city, I thought.

"He was going to be sick again. I think McKenzie went to look for him," JD said, his voice dried out and rough.

"How long ago?"

"Can't rightly say, sport."

We sat in silence for a while, hoping that the faintest of breezes would turn into something more. I felt myself drifting off again.

"Who was the guy in the kitchen?" I asked JD after what could have been two minutes as easily as it could have been an hour. For some inexplicable reason my mind had once again conjured that image of the lit-up doorway with police markings on the floor.

He looked at me, his head at a slight angle. "Dugan."

"Who's Dugan?"

"You know, tall guy, used to hand out the pills."

And then it fell into place. The shape on the floor could only have been him. The broad shoulders, the sheer size of him, the man who had danced with Miss Van Vuuren in my dreams, who had held her and drawn her yielding body into a corner. How could I not have known immediately?

"I think he heard someone messing about in the storeroom where they keep the pills," JD said, his voice slow and deliberate. "He went looking and got hit on the back of the head. The way I see it, he didn't know Mazza was hanging back on the outside. So, as he is standing with his hand on the door handle, about to go in, Mazza steps out of the shadows and takes a shot. And that's that."

"And that's that."

"Well, after that, Sibu still came out with a garbage bag full of pills."

We sat for awhile. There was still no breeze. "Is it really us and them like that?" I said.

JD thought about this for a moment. "No," he said. I waited for him to say more, but he didn't.

By late afternoon, the other two weren't back yet. I got up with great effort. My limbs had grown stiff in the hours I'd sat dozing off. I stumbled back out to the road and looked for footsteps. I didn't find any.

"They went that way," JD said behind me. He pointed to where the road disappeared between two slight rises.

"Okay, let's go then."

The sun threw long shadows as we walked. The breeze was finally picking up; it wasn't cool, or even very strong, but it did just enough to take the edge off the lingering heat.

The road passed between two low hills and then veered off to the right to avoid another, steeper hill. As we walked, we saw faint footsteps here and there. Some stretched out like long sad skid marks as McKenzie's legs must have lost what power remained in them.

As we trudged our way down the slight incline, JD suddenly put his arm out. He stood dead still. I followed his eyes off to the left of the road, to a spot beyond where the hill dropped away. Then I saw it. Gray, almost indistinguishable from its surroundings, the clear straight lines of a zinc roof. Even from that distance, it didn't look old.

"We have company," JD whispered under his breath.

Then I looked back at the ground. The two trails of footsteps were still there. Either they hadn't seen the house or they didn't care. Ahead of us there was no sign of them.

"I think we better wait," JD said. "We don't want to get spotted out here. We can take a closer look when it's dark."

He had a point, so we tracked back to a spot where the hill was between us and the house. Then we lay down flat on our backs a few metres from the road and waited. It was all we could do to hide.

Once again, we lay staring at the sky. It was as empty as if it had never contained a thing. The thought of clouds up there seemed impossible. It was just a vast, pale nothingness. Despite my sorry state, I found this pale emptiness quite reassuring. Yes, some barely audible voice seemed to tell me, there is nothing out there. No need to worry. There is no mystery that needs unfolding.

But at the same time I knew that the night would come and we would go looking for the other two and that we might not find them; or that someone else might have found them before us.

As it was, I didn't have to wait for nightfall to have my momentary illusion of peace shattered. As we lay there staring at the sky, we heard an excited shouting in the distance. It came from the direction of the house. A single gunshot rang out over the hard, dead earth. It sounded terribly close. I felt my tired muscles tensing up. Then it was quiet again. I looked at JD and he looked back at me with large, dull eyes.

"Maybe we should run," I whispered.

He just shook his head.

So we just lay there, holding our breaths, waiting it out. I kept my eyes on the line where sky met horizon, any moment expecting men in police or army uniforms to appear and aim their gleaming weapons on us. No-one came, though, and neither did I hear any more shouting or gunshots. Had JD not heard it as well, I would have doubted myself.

Eventually I tore my eyes away from that hypnotic line where earth met sky. Next to me, JD was breathing hard and heavy. He turned onto his side and started coughing in convulsions that shook his whole body. He reminded me of a small boy as he lay there. Whatever confidence he had once exuded, had been stripped away and all that was left,

was a skinny parody of a man. I'm ashamed to say it, but for a moment his childlike body sent a charge of revulsion through me. It seemed sick that such boyish limbs should be attached to the head of a man. How could such a wasted body succeed in the serious business of escaping?

He stopped coughing and lay motionless. I wondered if he was still alive. "You okay?" I asked.

He grunted in a way that I took to mean yes.

I knew, though, that he was not well. Earlier that afternoon his eyes had had a dullness about them which I had never seen before. Even as he was walking down the road with me, he no longer had the forceful push ahead he'd had the previous night on the plain.

Dusk came. When it was almost dark, I sat up. Off to the west, the sky still carried that red glow, but to the east it was dark. "I think it is late enough," I said.

JD turned his head to look at me, but it was as if he was looking through me. "You okay?," I asked again.

"Sure, sport," he said and slowly started getting up.

Rather than follow the road, we cut across to the left and climbed the low slope of the hill that stood there. When we reached the top, we crouched down on our haunches. We'd stand out like deathly pillars against the skyline if anyone down by the house took the time to look up.

Below us, the landscape was dark, almost too dark to make out any detail. The house was clear enough, though, a large dark patch against the red earth. From a window, a yellow light cast long rectangles onto the earth outside.

I listened, but I couldn't hear anything.

As my eyes grew accustomed to the light, I made out a garage to the left of the house. The light from the window fell on a strip of concrete to the side of it. We sat watching for a while.

"Shall we take a closer look?" I asked. He didn't answer. "Do you think they are there?"

"No," he said. "And if they are there, there is nothing we can do about it."

"Where else would they be? That road leads to the house, I'm sure of that."

"Maybe they're camped out somewhere on the other side," he said. "Just like we are here."

"But what we heard . . . Something certainly happened. Maybe they're locked up down there. Or maybe they've already been taken back to the hospital."

I froze. Down below, a door had opened and the silhouette of a man stood etched against the light. He held out a hand and then threw something with what looked like a flick of the wrist. Only then did I see the large black dog in front of him.

Then the man lit up what I took to be a pipe and stood there in his doorway smoking for a long time, peering out somewhere to the north of the hill we were on.

In front of him, the dog sat waiting patiently for more of what he had been given.

Eventually the man put out his pipe and went inside, closing the door behind him and leaving the dog outside. "I guess we're not going down there," JD said.

"No, I don't think that dog wants to be our friend."

So we tracked back down the hill to the road. When we got there, we continued in the direction that the other two had gone. It was dark now and the moon had grown thinner since the previous night. We couldn't see any footsteps, but we knew well enough that they too would have kept to the road.

Before too long, though, the road started curving to the left. As JD had predicted, it was turning toward the house. We decided to follow it until we could see the building. Surely that was as far as the other two would have gone. Even that seemed excessive though. Meintjies was sick and it was hard to believe that he had even come this far.

We had to be careful, though: At any moment the large shape of the dog could loom out of the dark and leap for our necks. There would be nothing for us to do. There would be no way for us to fight off an animal like that. We didn't have any weapons, even if we had the strength to use them.

Then I smelt the sickening sour milk tang of vomit and I knew that we were close. I whispered to JD to stop, but he had also smelt it and was already trying to figure out where it came from. We found it next to the road, covered up with loose sand. There was no sign of Meintjies or McKenzie, though.

I stepped in something, and when I bent down to smell it, I smelt blood. Had our poor comrade coughed it or bled it? I'll never know, I thought.

Far ahead of us, we saw the faint light of the house. Too much noise and the dog would come running. If Meintjies was vomiting out there in the middle of the day, chances are, someone noticed. "Maybe he's got them locked up in his garage," I whispered.

"Well, hell knows, sport," JD said, and after a long moment looking toward the faint light that must have been coming from that man's window, he turned around and started walking.

So we turned back once again. I suppose it was all we could do, but giving up on the two of them just like that didn't feel right. I wanted to believe that they were locked up in the garage, that we could sneak up to the house and rescue them. Deep down I knew how unlikely that was, though. The gunshot, the shouting voices . . . there was certainly more than one man, and that meant someone had come, probably to take the two vagrants away.

"Let's try for the highway tomorrow," JD said when we had tracked back some way down the dirt road. I felt we should keep going east and then turn north again once we've put some distance between the house and us. But JD said he couldn't. He wanted to go back to the ruined house where we had spent the afternoon and the way he said it made it clear that he wasn't negotiating. I could go my own way if I wanted to, but that was what he was going to do.

After what felt like an hour, we reached the spooky outlines of the old house. In the dark it looked as if there should be ghosts drifting about inside.

"Let us then be the ghosts to haunt this long dead place.

Let us strike fear into the hearts of those who gaze upon us . . .

fear and disgust in equal measure."

This is what I wanted to write in my notebook as I lay on that hard floor, letting my fingers play over its cracked, rubbery surface. I should have brought a notebook along, I thought. I was like a child who had left his only toy at home.

No, I wasn't like a child at all. As I lay there I felt old as no man of thirty-two should ever feel. I felt myself dying, just as I knew the friend of mine who lay against the opposite wall was also dying. How appropriate that we came to that place, where we could be old with that ruined building, where we could lament our lost lives as it laments its loss of inhabitants.

Above the spot where I lay, a thick nail stuck out of the wall at an odd angle. I reached up and ran my fingers over its rusty surface. Some long-dead man had put that there and hadn't thought on it twice. He had hammered it in there in a time when he still had hope for the building and its purpose; when the house was still worth saving.

Apart from the nail, though, that man had left no sign. No strip of tough, coarse fabric, no broken pots or pans, no door handles or legs of chairs, nothing from which to reconstruct a possible past. It was just a set of walls and a clay floor out in the middle of nowhere. And now it had two ghosts.

I wanted to thank that man for leaving his house for us and for leaving it so bare. How kind of him to have stripped it clear in preparation for our coming, to be away and not to bother us with tea and small talk. How kind to let me lie on that bare floor and look upon the stars and the deep dark blue that held them; to let me rest there as if it was my own kitchen. How kind of him to have left this world to make room for us.

Then I fell asleep and dreamt that I was sitting back in the ward.

Outside the window, a thin layer of snow covered the cold, red earth. Slivers of white clung to the wires like stretched spider webs on the verge of breaking. The fence poles stood cold and metallic in the crisp air. The pattern of a car's tracks could be vaguely made out on the road that led up to the ridge.

Underneath the window was a rag-tag of cars and old fashioned horse-drawn carriages, all black with gold trimmings. As before, they were parked in a large circle. The front of the hospital didn't look like that in real life, I thought. But what could I do, there it was.

I wanted to sketch this unusual view from my ward window, so I reached for my drawer and slid it open. The notebooks weren't there, though. I got up and looked through all the drawers, and then on the bed and under the mattress. They were gone.

I had been alone in the ward up until then, but as I was looking for the notebooks, I got the feeling that someone was watching me. When I looked up, the man with the scarred face was standing in the doorway leaning against the wall, his arms folded, an expression on his face that looked like faked pity.

"I'm looking for my notebooks," I said. "You don't perhaps know who might have taken them?"

"What notebooks?" he said, and smiled.

"Nevermind."

Only then did I notice that he was dressed up in a suit and tie. It didn't quite fit him, though. Something seemed just slightly off, as if the sleeves were too long and the shoulders just a little too narrow.

"Why are you wearing a suit?" I asked him.

"The ball, of course," he said. "Surely you saw all the guests arriving when you were sitting there staring out of the window in that serious manner of yours."

Even though it sounded like English and I could understand him, my dream-self believed the man to be speaking Polish. I still don't know why that is. He had spoken Polish in a previous dream as well. But surely the real man, the man I had seen that day sitting on the wall while I was waiting for Miss Van Vuuren, wouldn't have been Polish.

"Are you coming down?" he asked. "Maybe there is someone who wants to see you."

"Who?"

"Come on, get dressed. I can't wait for you all day."

When I looked in my cupboard, all I found was a suit I had last worn in high school. I could hardly squeeze into it. The jacket had only one button left and I felt the sleeve tearing where it met the shoulder. Compared to me, the man with the scar was dressed to kill.

I wanted to splash some water on my face and comb my hair, but he scowled at me. So I let it be and walked ahead of him out into the corridor and down the stairs. For some reason he insisted on walking behind me.

At the bottom of the stairs I wanted to turn left. I could hear the sound of violins and chatter blowing over from the ballroom like a warm breath. I even imagined I could

smell the waxy odour of resin beneath the perfumes that hung where guests must have passed moments before.

"No, we're going to the right!" the man said behind me. Whereas he had been mocking earlier, he now sounded angry.

So I turned to the right. The hallway was deserted in that direction. No yellow light beckoned.

I didn't know where I was going, yet it was as if something was leading me. I turned into the mess hall and saw a group of people gathered around a table on the furthest side. Miss Van Vuuren, dressed in a white evening dress, Dugan in a neat black tuxedo, and four or five other men whom I didn't know.

As I came closer, they all burst out laughing at something she was reading to them. She instinctively hid her face behind her hand as she giggled, but the men folded double and slapped each other on the shoulders. Their flushed faces had almost pained expressions on them.

Then, when I was only a few steps from the table, a tall, thin man noticed me and suddenly went quiet. He nudged his friend, who, on seeing me, did the same. Then I saw that the book Miss Van Vuuren had been reading from was one of my notebooks. The other three notebooks also lay scattered across the table. And one man had put a beer glass down on one of them.

By then she had also seen me. I watched as her expression changed from a smile to shock. Except for one of the men who still giggled softly, they were all quiet. She got up and, coming toward me, said, "I'm sorry, Barry. You shouldn't take it personally." She reached out to touch my arm with her white-gloved hand. She stopped short, though, as if she remembered my sickness just in time.

I wanted to say something, but nothing came out.

Dugan stepped forward and, putting his arm in the small of her back, whispered something in her ear. She looked up at him and blushed. “No harm done,” he said in a loud, booming voice. “Come on, everyone, they’ll be waiting for us in the ballroom.” She hooked into his arm and they led the way out, with the others following.

I walked over to the table where the notebooks lay discarded. One had a ring on it from the beer glass and when I picked it up I saw that the whole of the book was drenched in stale, watery beer. Another book had pages torn out, and another had lists of phone numbers written down in it.

“What did you expect?” the man with the scar said behind me in his Slavic drawl. “You were away so long. We thought you’d never come back.”

I didn’t answer him. Instead I just gathered up the books and turned to leave.

By then, he had moved over to the door that led from the mess hall to the room where they kept the pills. “Was it like this?” he asked, and went down on his knees. Then he lay down on the floor, supporting his head on his arm.

But I’ve just seen Dugan, I thought.

“Or was it like this?” he said, and stretched out his one arm, twisting his head to the left in an unnatural pose.

I left him lying there and walked out of the room and back up in the direction of the ward. I remember thinking that I should get out of the hospital. I wondered if JD’s plans were still on course. Maybe he would be in the ward and I could ask him. Maybe he’d have some idea of what was going on.

Halfway up the stairs I stopped, though. I stood listening to the muffled noise of the orchestra that was drifting through the corridors like a thick mist. The music sounded strange and alluring, as if the Balkan horn someone was playing was about to open a portal to another world – and that the cost of entry to this world would be paid in

absurdity. I could hear the voices of people singing along, ever more boisterous and intoxicated.

When I awoke, it was on a cold clay floor with the stars above me.

I noticed that JD wasn't snoring that strange otherworldly snore of his that I had come to know so well. I opened my eyes and looked at him for a long time; he was lying against the wall opposite me. I watched him with my eyes still thick with sleep and Miss Van Vuuren's presence still lingering but a moment away.

Then I realised that he wasn't moving. He lay with his mouth open, but with no sign of movement in either his nostrils or his throat. His face was distorted like a mask from some nightmarish puppet show, teeth and gums exposed, eyes staring blindly. The sleeve had shifted up his right arm as he was sleeping. Already the arm had a blue stain spreading underneath the soft white skin.

I rolled onto my back and sighed. Far above, the last stars were barely visible in the pre-dawn light. I knew that soon the day would break and that I would have to deal with the dead man laying next to me. And, who knows, the day might also be my last.

I felt the coolness of the morning air and lay in it, paralysed at the prospect of the day ahead of me.

When it was a bit lighter, I sat up and drank the last of my water. I wanted to toast JD or pay homage to him in some other way, but I didn't. Instead I just stared out through the space where a door had once been at the red earth and throwaway plants that stretched and then disappeared into the distant light of the morning.

Then I got up and walked around the house, kicking at the ground. At the side furthest from the road I found what I was looking for. That someone had once tried to plant something there seemed unthinkable, but someone had. Not that there were signs of

any plant life beyond the normal Karoo shrubs. Whatever basil or onions had once grown on that square patch of earth was long gone.

I dug the heel of my shoe into the soil and after a few stomps the surface broke. Underneath this harder crust it was sandy and soft.

I walked back to where JD was lying and slid his bag out from where he had propped it between himself and the wall. The knife wasn't there.

I found it in the left pocket of his pants, a steak knife, probably stolen from the kitchen at the hospital. I sat down and started cutting at my empty water bottle. After a minute the bottom half came loose. I coaxed the last few drops of water from it and went back to the garden where I started shovelling out sand with my makeshift garden tool.

The going was slow. As I shovelled, the sand kept running back into the hole. Maybe I should have thought of something better, but I couldn't.

To the east the sun was rising, and before long the sweat was once again running down my temples. My arm was tired and I felt like giving up. I thought of leaving JD in the house. No, what kind of a man does such a thing? So I kept digging.

The sun was already a good few degrees off the horizon when I finally had something approaching a decent hole. Roughly what I thought was JD's size, about 30 to 40 centimetres deep. It would have to do.

I went round to the front of the house. Odd thing was, as I was about to enter through the place where the door had once been, I suddenly felt the need to knock on a door. It was as if some reverse magnetism was pushing me away from there and telling me not to enter. I should be wearing a suit and tie, I thought.

So I hung back for a minute out front, listening to the silence and smelling the faint smell of dust on the air. I looked at the remains of the old dirt road that disappeared between the two low hills. Over there, over there are people; there are churches and

cemeteries where proper burials can be held. Over there, there are funeral regulations and family, letters to be sent and phone calls to be made.

I didn't even know if he had any family.

Then, despite how wrong it felt, I turned around and went in. I picked JD's rigid body up under the shoulders and dragged him out the door and round the house, his feet making snake lines in the sand. Even to my weakened arms his body felt strangely light. Once again it struck me that there was something childlike about him.

I laid him down in the hole with what gentleness I could manage. He barely fit. I had to twist his stiff legs and fold his arms tight over his stomach. I propped his head to the side so that his mouth would stay closed. Then I pulled his eyelids down with my thumbs and sat looking at him.

"What the fuck did you have to go doing that for?"

As if to respond, his limp head shifted a centimetre to the left as his body settled in the sand.

Then I started covering him up, not with the careful digging of before, but shoving the loose earth over him with my hands. I had to get it over with. What had been bearable before, had turned into a nightmare.

I think I might have screamed then. I'm not sure. I felt my mind was going. "What kind of a man?" I shouted. What I wanted to add was, ". . . has to bury his friend all alone?"

When I eventually managed to cover most of him, I stood up and looked down at the mound. Anyone peeking around the back of the house would see that something was buried there. Maybe the dog we saw would dig him up, I thought. Maybe one day the dog would pad up to his boss with JD's arm in his mouth and soon after the police would be out here digging up the rest of him. And maybe then they'd come looking for me.

I went back into the house. The inside wall was only one brick in width. I stood against the far wall and, with a three-step run-up, threw all my weight behind my shoulder and rammed into it. To my surprise it gave. A large strip next to the inner doorway broke off and then scattered into further pieces as it hit the ground.

I picked up the largest of the pieces, which was roughly the size of a chessboard. I took it round back and laid it down over the place where his head was. Then I took out the knife that I had unconsciously slipped into my pocket and wrote on the slab "JD" in large letters. And then, with no idea what else to write, I carved out the words "Peace be with you".

I would have liked to leave then, but the exertion had left me too tired. I tasted my own blood, and when I wiped my mouth, the back of my hand was stained red. So, I lay down in a strip of shade inside the ruined house and rested. To my surprise I had discovered a half a bottle of water in JD's bag. I drank from it, ignoring the threat of cross infection that shot through my mind like an institutional directive. What if I got infected by a second strain? Surely it didn't matter at this point.

I dozed off again, and had it not been for a horrible coughing fit at about noon, I might have slept all day.

Later I lay wondering if I, too, was going to die there. But something in the air told me I wasn't. For all the lead in my limbs, there was still some force that wanted me to keep going. I thought of the large white pill Von Hansmeyer had given me. How long would that last me?

Then I thought how odd it was that I was the only one left out there. Me, the one who was only tagging along, the one who knew from the outset that there would be nothing out there. Nothing to run to, nothing to find. Still, I might as well play out the part.

I lay amongst the ruins all that afternoon. At about four I woke from a disjointed sleep to find myself drenched in sweat. While I was sleeping, the sun had shifted and I

was lying fully exposed to that deathly radiation. I moved to a shady strip of floor against another wall and dozed on again.

When I woke next, it was dusk and I was running a fever. I toyed with the idea of staying there, waiting for the reaper to come drag me away, but as dusk turned to darkness, I pulled myself together. My limbs felt like dead weights and even just standing made me feel as if all my muscles were stretched to the point of breaking. But, as I say, there was some strange force pulling me on.

I got up and took the skeleton of a road we had taken before and just kept going due east where it turned toward the house. My plan was simple – put some distance between me and the house and then turn north to the N20.

Once again the land lay like large, flat waves in the dim moonlight. I felt the last of the day's heat radiating from the earth and then just hanging there in the stagnant air.

I made good ground. Travelling on my own, there was no-one else to consider, and no-one else considering me. I was alone, and my outlook on the world around me changed as it does when one is alone. Every shadow, every stick in the sand, everything seemed just a little sharper. I had to be on the lookout now. There was no JD to caution with the lift of an arm.

Around me, the field was as lifeless as before, but somehow it seemed as if life was just a moment away. At any instant a snake would slither out of a hole in front of me, or some desperate last police search party will appear in the distance and I'll hear the far-off barking of dogs.

I told myself it was safe. I had gone about an hour's walk east of the house. Despite the fatigue in my legs, I climbed a small rise. It could hardly be called a hill. Nevertheless I felt the difference between it and the flat walk I had had up until then.

When I got to the top, I sat down. And then, far to the north, I could see a small light moving across the plain, and then another from the opposite direction. The highway.

Even with no wind I couldn't hear it. I guessed it to be about four or five kilometres away. It was hard to judge.

I remembered that the previous time I had looked upon a distant road like that was through a window. I was about ten years old, on holiday with my mother and some of her family. I couldn't sleep and lay staring out of the window at the distant back and forth of that single strip of lights, forever caught up in that one line, never to move beyond it.

I spat in the dirt. What use are memories when what lies between you and them is a wasteland? What good are the pictures of lost loved ones if you no longer have the eyes to see them? It is as God told Lot . . . looking back is madness.

Back in the direction I'd come from, I imagined I could see a very faint light, but I wasn't sure. I thought of the man who had stood in that doorway smoking his pipe. Maybe he, too, carried the bug. Maybe that was why he was living out there. He certainly wasn't farming or using the land in any other way. Clearly he just didn't want to be among people. Maybe I would have liked to meet that man.

As I was thinking this, I suddenly felt the hair on my neck standing upright. Something had moved in the dark. It couldn't have been more than a hundred metres away, down at the bottom of the hill in the direction from which I had come. Then I saw it again, a large, dark shape, moving indefinably against a dark background.

I got up and, bent over, shuffled off toward the north so as to put the hill between me and whatever it was. I thought that it might be another escapee, in which case I probably had no reason to be scared. But then, it might have been the man we had seen, or a wild animal, or who knows what.

After a few steps, I started jogging, and then, as the land flattened out underneath me, I did the closest thing to running that my limbs were capable of. I thought I heard something crack behind me. Then I was sure there was something chasing me. I didn't dare look back.

I ran as fast as I could. Then, quite suddenly, there was nothing under me and for a long moment I was flying. I crashed down onto the hard earth . . . I felt the skin scraping off my left knee and my hands stinging with the impact. I tried to get up but a lightning bolt of pain shot through my leg as I did so.

I heard my pursuer coming closer and closer.

And then, quite suddenly, I didn't care anymore. I lay on my side and instead of trying to run or getting out JD's steak-knife for a fight, I just looked back and waited. Whatever it was – let it have me. Whatever it was, surely I had seen worse, surely I had nothing more to fear. What useless thing inside me had run in the first place? If there was a demon I had to meet out there, surely I should face it head-on. If it was JD come to haunt me, I should be glad. Either way, it suddenly dawned on me that there would be no more running, and the thought comforted me.

Then, the black shape was standing there, etched out above the half-a-metre drop. Gracefully, it slipped down and came toward me. The demon had taken the shape of a large four-legged animal. Fearlessly it came up to me and licked my face with a long, sloppy tongue.

It sniffed my knee and my neck. With its warm, gushing breath there, I wondered if it wouldn't be tempted to open its jaw and to sink its teeth into my sinewy flesh. I would not have minded at that moment. As I say, I was feeling a kind of peace just then that I hadn't felt before. And had it sunk its canines into my neck like a vampire, I would have stroked its head with all the tenderness I had left and begged it to sit by me while the stars faded above me.

We will sacrifice ourselves to those who dare not have us, I thought.

The dog sniffed the ground and then, moving a few steps away, circled twice and lay down. It watched me intently.

I tried to get up again. I felt the wetness against my pants where my left knee was bleeding. Something else was also wrong inside the leg. Once again the pain shot through my bones like an electric current.

Eventually I got up, though. As long as I kept the leg straight it was okay.

I looked at the dog and it got up. I held my hand out and it came closer. He let me scratch his ear as if it was the most natural thing in the world. Then he pulled away and traced something with his nose on the ground. He scratched at the earth with his paw as if there was something he wanted to uncover. I bent over and saw a hole in the ground. Snake, I thought.

The dog sat looking at the hole and then at me. Then I turned and with my bad leg started hobbling northward. The large, black shape came with me, all the time, exploring the veld around me, finding things in the dirt to stick his nose into, things I never knew were there.

After a while, though, I looked around and he was gone.

The going was slow that night. Still, after a few hours in a dream-like march, I found myself standing next to the dark, shiny surface of the road. There were no cars then. I kneeled down and felt its rubbery, tarred texture with my hands. It was still warm, as if the heat of the cars passing over it had been sucked into it like a sponge.

It had probably been three years since I'd seen a road, and it seemed something wonderful to me. It was a technological wonder in an alien landscape.

From far away I heard the mechanical growl of a car approaching. I stepped back and suddenly thought what a mess I must look. With the last drops of water I rinsed my mouth and with a wet hand tried to clean my face. I felt the dust peeling away as I tried. I ran my fingers through my hair and then, figuring it was hopeless, I just stood there, holding out my thumb.

But if the driver saw me, he gave no sign. The white Mercedes just sped by, leaving me to shudder like a tree in its wake. Soon after, another car passed. A third slowed down, but didn't stop. It wasn't going to be easy.

It was a large Coca Cola truck that finally took pity on me, many passing cars later. The driver punched his horn and slowly ground his ship to a halt some fifty metres down the road. "Come on, I don't have all night," he yelled as I lumbered up to the passenger-side door, my bloodied leg having gone numb.

I opened the door and struggled to lift myself into the chair. The man leant over and pulled me up by the arm. When I finally sat next to him, he looked at me with large eyes. "Where on earth are you coming from, young man?" he asked. "You look like a damn zombie."

"Looks worse than it is," I said and tried to smile. "Where are you heading?"

"All the way to Joeys."

"I'd like to go as far as you can take me."

"Okay, no problemo. I can always do with some company. Name is Themba, by the way."

And by then we were already back on the road, the lights sending yellow beams ahead into the Karoo night, air streaming in through the open windows.

The trucker was a chubby man with a round face. Despite his short, greying hair his body was young and muscular. "I've picked up many hikers in my day, but never one who looked as bad as you," he said and laughed. "I don't mean to be rude. I'm just saying that you must really be down on your luck."

"I've had a rough time of it," I said. "But maybe that's over now." I tried not to look at him as I spoke. Even though it was unlikely that I would infect him in a windy cockpit like that, I couldn't be sure.

"You from around here, boy?" he asked after a silence.

"All over, I suppose. But mostly Cape Town."

"Ah, the Mother City," he said. "I have some family down there. I sometimes go by to see them when I'm down there. Strange town that, I tell you, strange. People are crazy violent down there."

He told me of his brother-in-law who ran a bicycle shop in Khayelitsha, and how this brother had almost been shot once when the gangs were shooting it out in the street outside his shop. "The bullet went this close to his head," he said and held up his thumb and index finger. "This country is falling apart," he said, and looked at me, taking his eyes off the road for what felt like a full ten seconds. He was looking for an answer from me, and when it wasn't forthcoming, he went on, "And the police and the government are all in on it. It is all one bloody mess of corruption. Corruption, I tell you."

As soon as he'd said all that, he laughed again and seemed completely relaxed.

I turned up the volume and we listened to Radio 2000 playing Dire Straits and some blues rock I didn't know the name of. There was no announcer, just an endless line of songs with little in common beyond the fact that they weren't of this century.

Ahead of us, the lights of a small town shimmered dimly in the distance. Already the horizon showed the first signs of the approaching dawn. The dark, empty wastes slid by noiselessly. I could hardly keep my eyes open.

When he reached the town, we pulled into a large garage. A man dressed in a BP uniform came out, and Themba got out and walked over to him and shook his hand. "There are toilets over there," Themba said, looking back at me. He pointed over to a light blue door next to a shop that was closed. Then the two of them walked off, not paying any further attention to me.

I hardly noticed the foul smell in the bathroom. I drank and drank from the tap until I felt dizzy. Then I took my clothes off and washed as well as I could standing at a basin. It felt wonderful to scrub the grime from my face and neck, to scoop handfuls of water onto my head and to feel the oil and dirt coming loose and getting washed away. I'd had no idea just how dirty I had got.

When I was done, I dried myself as best I could with an oily towel that lay on the floor. It didn't work very well, and neither did it feel right to get back into my dirty clothes.

Still, when I got back outside, I felt wonderful. I breathed the petroleum fumes deep into my lungs and felt the morning air on my skin. There was something terribly vivid and real about standing there, as if I was alive again for the first time in ages. Across an intersection I could see a double-story block of apartments where people were no doubt sleeping. And beyond it, a small side street disappeared between two buildings. I thought about running down that street and disappearing amidst those buildings, fading into the reality of that settlement like a handful of dust in the desert.

At the same time, though, that early-morning garage had something dream-like about it, as if the clear glass of that new reality could be shattered at any moment.

So I walked over to the truck and stood waiting for Themba. "Hey, young man!" he called from across the tarmac. "Come on over." He was standing in a doorway on the other side of the shop. "You look better," he said when I reached him. "This is Athol," he said, and nodded toward a man in a red and yellow BP uniform and cap who was sitting on a yellow plastic chair inside the dimly lit room.

As I entered, the man got up and shook my hand with thin, limp fingers. He offered me coffee in a quiet, wispy voice. I accepted without a second thought. He walked over to a kettle and poured hot water into a tin cup. A small, muted black and white TV flashed against the wall above him.

I sat listening to the two of them talking about other truckers and of how expensive fuel was getting. “They want to switch us over to electric trucks,” Themba said and laughed. “Can you believe it? Bad publicity for Coke to be polluting the planet. But that will be even more expensive. I tell you, soon no-one will have a job.”

I sipped the sweet coffee and felt grateful for the man’s generosity. As I drank, though, I became aware of an immense hunger. Without realising what I was doing, I was staring at a half a loaf of bread that lay in a plastic bag next to the kettle. The BP man noticed, and without saying anything he took two slices from the bag and handed them to me, all the time listening to Themba talking.

I ate the bread, and it was like eating manna from heaven. It tasted fresh and wholesome. I dipped it in the coffee. Athol smiled at me. “The bakery truck dropped the bread just before you guys arrived,” he said. “It is for the shop, but I always take one, cost price.” He seemed satisfied with himself. At the same time, though, a slight frown creased his forehead.

From the open door we heard the soft growl of a car pulling in. Themba got up and stood in the doorway looking out. Then he walked off to greet whoever had stopped there.

I looked at the BP man, but his eyes were lowered. It was then that I noticed the pay phone against the wall behind the door and his frown started to make sense.

“I’m sorry, brother,” Athol murmured and got up slowly, straightening his BP uniform as he did so.

I followed him out and saw Themba and two policemen in dark blue pants and light blue shirts walking across the tarmac toward us.

“Are you Barry?” the first policeman asked when he came close enough. He looked at me and then down at a printed page with faces on.

I said that I was.

“Mister James Barry?”

“You could say that.”

He peered down at the paper. “Yes, you could be.”

“Of course it is him,” his colleague interjected.

“You’ll have to come with us. We’re under orders to take you back to Pearson.”

He took a neatly folded mask from his shirt pocket and slid it over his head. His partner did the same. “I’d get myself tested if I were you,” he said, looking at Themba. “These guys are like the plague.”

“Yes, sir,” Themba nodded in agreement, even though the two policemen were probably much younger than he was.

“Hands,” the second policeman said and unhooked a pair of handcuffs from his belt. “Your hands,” he said again when I didn’t move. I looked around, and saw Themba looking away. I looked for the BP man as well, but he had turned around and was doing something to one of the fuel pumps.

So I lifted my hands up in front of me and let him slide the heavy shackles into place. Then they led me over to the car and opened the back door. I climbed in and the second policeman slammed the door behind me.

As I sat there, I looked back at the garage and the shop and the light blue door, which the first morning light was already colouring a more distinctive shade of blue. Soon the day’s light would cut the world up, sharp as broken glass.

Then I saw the BP man, who had turned from what he was doing and stood staring toward the car. There was such a look of absentminded sadness on his thin face that I could hardly look away.

Were you thinking of someone else, my brother? Did you just betray your own flesh and blood, your best friend? Or is that one already dead?"

Soon the two front doors had also slammed shut and the car pulled away with a stutter. "We're taking you home where you belong, Mister Barry," the first policeman said, turning to look back at me. I couldn't stand his eyes looking at me as if I was some kind of freak. I looked away and saw the large red frame of the Coca Cola truck where it still stood parked next to the garage. As the car turned a corner, I knew that I'd never see that truck or that garage again, nor the two men for that matter.

"We got him, control," the first policeman said into a microphone. "Mister James Barry. We're taking him straight to Pearson."

"Copy that. I'll let them know you are coming. Please report at Pearson," a crackly female voice blurted back.

We drove through the quiet early morning streets of that town. A tall red-haired man was sliding open the security gates in front of a grocery store. I imagined what it would be like in that grocery store when it opened up. The smell of fruit, a young lady rushing in for a litre of milk, a beggar asking for a single cigarette.

Two blocks further on I saw a man sitting in a light blue car reading the paper. The windows seemed steamed up, cold. What was he waiting for? Was he travelling? Was he waiting for a doctor's office to open? Was he on the run from a wife who was now frantically making phone calls in a town 300 kilometres back into the nothingness?

And then, as we turned from the main road, three large, over-dressed women were walking to work, or wherever, absorbed in their conversation. They walked with such relaxed ease that it seemed they had been given infinity, and had thought it good.

I saw all of this, and the paper bags and milk cartons, the dry road-side gutters and the faded old poster on the wall of a bottle store, and it seemed otherworldly to me, as if I was an alien just recently set down here.

On our way out of town, the houses seemed strangely exotic to me, like exhibits in a museum. With their driveways and their fences, their painted walls and dirty windows, the stubborn attempts to grow gardens in a hostile climate. Everything about them said that foreign men lived there, a kind of man altogether different from me.

I wanted to stop the car, get out, and walk among them. I wanted to press my face against their windows and watch these wives and husbands and children and grandparents go about their boring business. I wanted to watch them sitting down for breakfast and reading the paper. I wanted to see what odd rituals they performed in their gardens and how they passed the time in their living rooms. I wanted to know what they did with their time, what it was that made them so different from me. I wanted to penetrate that wall of nothingness that was keeping our worlds apart.

Still, I could as little reach into their world as I could go back to undo my past. There was less than a stone's throw between us, but they might as well have been half a world away in a foreign country I would never see.

Soon, though, I had to turn in my seat in order to look back at the houses. They slipped out of sight just as they had slipped into my mind. We left town not by the N20, as Themba and I had come, but by a smaller artery that ran down toward the south west.

As we drove, the two policemen also seemed alien to me. The Afrikaans they spoke to each other might as well have been Martian. Not that I don't understand Afrikaans, I speak it quite well; it was just that something about the way they spoke it, and about being there at that moment, made it seem as foreign as Mandarin.

But whereas the strangeness of the town and its buildings had cast a spell on me, things were different inside the car. The policemen might have been of that other world, and might even have spoken in its strange noises, but there was nevertheless a sickening familiarity about them.

They knew something of my empty world, and I knew something of theirs. We had strayed into the no man's land between our lives just enough to be trespassing, and not enough to be there legitimately.

We had hardly picked up speed when we slowed down again and I saw a sign by the road that said "Pearson". Could it be that we had gone such a short distance in all that time? Was that all JD's stubbornly insistent walking had achieved, a mere twenty-minute drive?

The car came to a virtual standstill and we turned off to the right. We drove up a single-lane road up a hill and when we reached the top, I saw it all laid out in front of me. There was the guard tower, the fence, and beyond it the sprawling dirty white of the hospital, lying there like a fallen animal made of a child's building blocks.

Apart from the guard, whom I could see sitting in his tower by the gate, there wasn't anyone visible. Two cars stood parked far off to the right, the first rays of sunlight just catching their windows. We descended slowly toward the gate. Despite all my time watching cars come up and down that road, I'd had no idea how bumpy it was.

When we got to the gate, the first policeman got out and went up to the guardhouse. They greeted like men who knew each other, and then the guard said something into a microphone. After that, he climbed down and removed a large padlock from the gate. It used to be he could just press a button to open it, but now he flung it open with his hands.

We drove in and as we passed him, the guard gave me a bestubbled smile that seemed to say, "I knew you'd be back, oh one who sits staring from the window."

As the car swung around to park, I spotted the man who had been introduced to me as Boesman standing by one of the outside benches. He was deep in conversation with one of the patients. He wasn't wearing the standard-issue uniform of the patients, but a suit and tie. I wasn't sure if what I was seeing was real. Had they been fooling us all along? I looked away and made sure not to look in that direction again.

A male nurse with slick black hair opened the car door as we came to a standstill. I didn't know him. Was he Dugan's replacement, I wondered. He greeted the policeman and then, turning to me, said in a nasal twang, "Mister Barry, so glad you're back."

"Actually, it is Mister James," I said, "My first name is Barry."

"Well, okay Barry," he said, an agitated tone creeping into his voice. "Come with me, I think it will be best if you wait in one of the consultation rooms until Doctor Von Hansmeyer can see you."

I never knew the hospital had consulting rooms. In fact, what he led me to was a small storeroom that now only contained two chairs and a table. "I just have to help these two policemen quickly," he said. Then he closed the door behind me and I heard him turn the key.

As soon as he closed the door, it was dark. I walked over to where a thin strip of light showed underneath the door and felt the walls for a light switch. I found it and flicked it on. The room had no windows, which explained why it had been so very dark. I sat down again and waited. Eventually I got tired of sitting up straight and lay down on the hard cement floor. And then all the morning and previous night's adventure caught up with me and manifested in the form of a heaviness that seemed to drag me down to the ground and pin me down as by a mass of bricks. I fell asleep with the light still on.

When I woke, I had no idea where I was. I lay with my eyes closed, wondering if I might have died. It felt like a bed beneath my back and my head seemed to be on a pillow. I felt the barely perceptible weight of a sheet. I thought of sniffing the air, but fearing that the effort may wake me, I decided against it.

I felt a familiar kind of drowsiness, the kind of thing you feel when just about to fall asleep with a smile on your face. And then, as I realised that I had been drugged, it dawned on me, slowly, like a bird flying over the horizon and slowly wafting closer over a great distance, that I was back in the hospital. As the bird dropped down to land on my

outstretched arm, I remembered the journey in the police car and the black-haired nurse who had met us.

I knew that I was busy waking up. I wanted to linger in that pre-wakefulness world for a while longer, but something was pulling me toward consciousness, something that could not be resisted. Eventually, I let my eyelids drop open and stared straight into the bespectacled eyes of Doctor Von Hansmeyer.

At first he didn't notice me. He was staring through me, momentarily lost in thought. Then his eyes came back into focus and met mine. "Ah, Barry, you are awake," he said, smiling broadly. "We thought you had died out in the desert. You almost did die, you know."

Only then did I notice the drip next to the bed and the large bag filled with a clear golden liquid hanging from it. I only felt a vague discomfort where the needle pierced my arm. What I felt was probably the adhesive that was keeping it in place, though. I thought of the bird's claws.

Then I opened my mouth to say something to Von Hansmeyer, who was bent over writing something in my file. As I wanted to say it, I forgot what it was. I still can't remember.

I was in the emergency room in the same bed I had been in before. Someone else was lying two beds to my left. To my right the curtain was obstructing whatever was behind it. I wondered if there was another corpse there.

"What happened to your roommate?" Von Hansmeyer asked when he was done writing. "He is one of the few we haven't found yet."

"JD?"

"Yes, Jonathan."

Once again I saw his limp body lying in that shallow grave and felt the sun beating down on me. Was your name Jonathan?

"I don't know," I said. "I lost track of him."

He didn't look like he believed me. "Mmm. Well, when you are up the police will be coming to take a statement from you. So you might want to think about what you are going to tell them. There is no need to be heroic, Barry. If he killed a man, there is no reason to protect him."

Could it be that they suspected him? The thought sent a shiver down my back. And then I clicked that Von Hansmeyer seemed to think that I had nothing to do with it. Did he know something I didn't?

He came round to my side and took my pulse. "How are you feeling?" he asked. I said that I was tired and that I felt like I couldn't lift my limbs.

"And your lungs? Are you breathing easily?"

I took a breath and said no. "My lungs feel like flat tires."

"Inflammation. You are lucky to be alive, Barry, lucky to be alive."

When I woke in the evening, the bird had let go of my forearm. My arms and legs felt a bit lighter, but my lungs still lay like sunbaked bricks in my chest. I sat up and felt the blood draining from my head as I did so. The curtains had been drawn and the only light in the room fell into it through the half-open door that led to the corridor.

I forced my legs out of bed and stood unsteadily next to it. However had I managed to walk, and even run, less than twenty-four hours before? What unknown life-force had given me the strength to keep going?

Out of the dark in front of me a croaky voice said "Barry? It is you."

“McKenzie?” I asked in the direction of the bed where I had seen someone lying earlier.

“Yes, it is me,” he said and waited for me to speak.

“We went looking for you. We didn’t know what had happened.”

“We didn’t really know ourselves. I don’t know what we were thinking we’d achieve. We walked straight into it. But we needed help then. He was as good as gone.”

“Meintjies?”

“Yes, Meintjies, over there,” he said. “Behind the curtain.”

Slowly I walked round to the curtain. The square of light that fell in through the door coloured the foot of the curtain a light medical turquoise. I stood for a moment and then pulled back the curtain.

There was no-one, just an empty, unmade bed.

“He’s not here,” I said.

McKenzie didn’t answer. I climbed back into bed and lay listening to the occasional voice drifting down the hallway toward us.

Then, after a long time, McKenzie cleared his throat. “And is JD not here either?”

“No,” I said. “JD got away . . . so to speak.”

“Ah, JD. That old bastard,” he said softly.

We lay for a long time listening to what little noise there was. Judging by how quiet the hospital was, it must have been after official lights-out. Only the occasional echo of footsteps drifted in through the open door.

“So where did they pick you up?” he asked just as my thoughts were beginning to trail off.

So I told him about reaching the road and hitching a ride with a Coke truck and then being to slow to figure out that the truck driver had called the cops on me.

“They’re giving out rewards, you know. That truck driver friend of yours must have thought he’d won the lottery when he picked you up.”

“At least I made someone happy.”

At this he laughed, “Damn, you are morbid,” and for a moment I was back on the outside, on that first night out, when we’d lain on the hard earth laughing at the strange noises we make.

But if it was funny, it was only so in the worst possible way. Maybe we laughed because that was all that there was left to do. A man can only do so much crying in his life, then his face goes hard and rubbery, the salt sets in his eyes, and what sadness he has, he carries with him like a bad limp.

“You know who came to see me?” he asked, “Johannes. He was here this morning. He even asked about you.”

“That old man?” I could hear that McKenzie wanted to talk, nevermind that it sounded as if every rough syllable required a great deal of effort.

“He was good. I mean on the night we got out. Did you see that?”

“No, I was sleeping.”

“Well, he stumbles out of the front door quoting Shakespeare. Well, it sounded like Shakespeare. Anyway, he starts real quiet, and then as the guard tries to talk sense into him he gets louder and louder. Next thing Gerrie and two nurses are out there with

him. Then he shouts, 'Folly, I tell you, it is folly!' I could hardly stop myself from cracking up. I was sitting in the bathroom listening through the window."

"And then?"

"Well, he calmed down and I heard them talking a bit more before they took him back in. You really missed something. I don't think we could have done it without him."

And then, quite suddenly, McKenzie was quiet. I waited for him to continue, but he didn't. Soon after, I heard his soft snoring, raspy and gentle, like I imagine that of a healthy man might be.

The next morning after breakfast Von Hansmeyer came round and said that I could go back to my ward. "I trust you won't try escaping again, Barry?" he said. "And if you do, please take some pills with you. We don't want you breeding resistance out there. As it is, we might have to change your regimen."

It felt strange to be back in the ward without JD. The beds were made and all our things had been cleared out – all our clothes, our shoes, and even my notebooks. I decided not to let it bother me. After all, when I left I knew I was leaving all of it behind . . . or did I? Either way, it was all gone.

I lay down on the clean, neatly made bed. Everything about the ward seemed cleaner than it had ever been. Even the air, with its faint smell of a lemon-fragranced cleaning product, seemed to have been purified in our absence. I had come back, but I had come back to a different place.

I turned onto my side and lay staring out the window. There it was, the hard red earth, the fence cold and glinting in the sun, the guard house, the road that crept up the ridge, and beyond it that great big sky. Out there nothing had changed. It was still the same indifferent world of dust and throwaway, the same merciless sun, the same fences, the same long-dead God of human suffering.

I couldn't tear my eyes away from it. That I had missed it seemed crazy, but I had. I wanted to lie there forever, basking in the indifference of that great absence out there. I wanted to let it wash over me in great big waves. I wanted to curl up and let myself be submerged in its weightless apathy.

As I felt myself drifting away, I saw a car crossing the ridge. I watched it weave its way down toward the gate and park next to two other cars over to the left. However perfect the bubble was that had been forming around me, something seemed out of place now. But whether from tiredness or drugs, my eyelids couldn't stay open.

What I think I remember, is her, walking across toward the guardhouse, handbag slung over her shoulder, a lightness in her step as if she was floating. But I could have dreamt this, for I don't remember her entering through the gate, and the image I have of her walking seems just too much like a dream.

Either way, there was once again a line, however fragile, that kept me from drifting away completely. Even as I slept a feverish sleep I felt it pulling me back and letting me go, and pulling me back again.

When I finally woke up, it was not to her, but to the new male nurse with the dark hair leaning over me and tugging on my arm. "Mister James, the police are here to see you. Please get up."

For a moment I didn't recognise him, nor the ward. It crossed my mind that I might be in some normal hospital somewhere or that I might have passed out next to the road and some friendly alien had taken me into his house.

"They are waiting downstairs."

"Okay, I'm coming," I said, and started getting up. The memory of my surroundings hit me like biting into something rotten. Every day it seems I'm waking up somewhere else, waking into another unpredictable mess. If anything, sleep is the hole through which I fall from one unpleasant surprise to another.

They were waiting for me in the consultation room I had been in before. It wasn't the same guys who had brought me. These were clearly of another rank in that unfathomable ladder of progression in law enforcement. Two plain clothes cops with white shirts with collars and ties. One with large eyes and a tall, square face, the other shorter and with a smile that reached to his ears – to go with his large nose, which seemed to have been twisted a few degrees off ninety, probably the result of a collapsed scrum or a bar fight by the looks of him. I wished he'd take his mask off so I could get a better look.

"When last did you see Jonathan Cronin?" the one with the nose asked once they had sat me down. He was sitting on the other side of the metal table while his friend with the watery eyes stood against the wall with his arms folded.

"I don't know, maybe last Tuesday."

"Very funny. We know you were amigos. We knew you went out together. Now, when last did you see your friend?"

"I can't rightly say, my mind is a bit fuzzy. I think the sun might have gotten to me."

"Ok, then . . . which way did you go once you got through the electric fence?"

"North," I said.

"And who was with you?"

"Peter Pan."

"What's your problem?" he said. I saw his ears turning red. The smile lines that had been visible on both sides of his mask smoothed themselves out. "This is not a trivial matter. This is a murder investigation!" He slammed his fist down on the table so that its surface kept vibrating long after.

His friend just stood there placidly, now and again twisting his long maroon tie around his index finger. It would have been just like in the cop shows, only there were no wires in the place, no one-way mirror, and whoever these guys were, they didn't look like they knew what they were doing.

"Now," the one with the nose said, "When you escaped, you broke the law. We can have you taken out of here. There are a lot worse places than this, you know. You are only being allowed to stay because the hospital is being nice."

"What murder investigation?" I asked, pretending not to notice his anger. He buried his head in his hands and ignored me.

"One of the nurses," the one against the wall said quietly.

"And why on earth would you suspect JD?"

"We can't tell you that," he said, looking at me with soft eyes that seemed to say everything will be fine. His large-nosed friend snorted and swore under his breath.

"JD is not your man," I said.

"Okay," soft eyes said, "help us then find the real killer."

I said that JD had woken me up and that when we got downstairs Dugan was already lying in a puddle of his own blood. "JD was as shocked as I was." I figured I might as well lie since they wouldn't believe me anyway.

"I thought you didn't know that someone got killed," the nose said, his head shooting up, his eyes bloodshot.

"I must have forgotten," I said.

"You, you are digging a grave for yourself, mister," he said.

"And outside, where did you last see him?" soft eyes asked, putting a restraining hand on his partner's shoulder. And there we were, exactly where I didn't want to be. I had no idea whether McKenzie had talked to them yet. Did they know that we were all travelling together? Did McKenzie spill the beans about the ruined old house?

"I lost track of JD when we were out," I said after making them wait. "I figured my best chance would be to keep going north to the N20. I didn't want to walk into a roadblock. JD didn't care, though, he was going straight east. What can I say, he was right, I was wrong."

"Are you sure you are not lying to us?" the nose said, looking at me with what looked like pure hatred. Even so, I thought they bought it.

"That's about as honest as I can be," I said.

"So, you travelled alone? Is that your official statement?"

"Yes, alone."

When they let me go, I went to see McKenzie. He was alone in the quiet of the emergency room. He lay snoring that same soft, pleasant snore, the snore of someone at peace with the world, the kind of snore you'd expect from a man falling asleep in his own lounge while watching television.

I sat by his bedside and waited for him to wake up. A nurse came in, took a sceptical look at us and turned around again. Eventually the bell ran for lunch. I wasn't very hungry, but I went to the mess hall anyway. Maybe I shouldn't have.

I walked past the spot where Dugan's body had lain. There was a tray table standing there, as if nothing at all had happened. I stood in line for some of the watery rice and stew, and as I waited, I realised how empty the hall was. Then I wondered where I was going to sit. The three I had always sat with, were all gone – JD rotting in the sand, McKenzie snoring peacefully in the emergency room, Meintjies probably freezing in the morgue. Like JD, he was sleeping the big sleep.

In the end, I sat down on my own and struggled to eat even half of the food on my plate.

Afterward I went back to emergency and found McKenzie sitting up with a tray on his lap. I told him about the morning's interrogation. He said that I had nothing to worry about, the police hadn't spoken to him yet. "If they ask me, I'll say that Meintjies and I had been on our own," he said.

"Thank you. That should keep them off my back."

"No problem, suits me fine. I couldn't care less what really happened."

Back in my ward, I lay down again. I felt weaker than ever. Von Hansmeyer had said that I had probably done irreparable damage to my lungs during the escape. As I lay on my bed, I could feel it.

It felt like I was breathing into a flat football. Only thing was, no matter how much I tried, I couldn't get it to inflate, even a little. It was just a crumpled up mess of inflamed scar tissue that wouldn't budge.

So I breathed my shallow breaths and waited. For what, I didn't know or didn't much care.

The ward seemed strangely empty without JD. In fact, the whole hospital seemed empty to me. The mess hall, the corridors, the bathrooms, and the backyard, it all felt deserted, as if those of us who were there had come to school during the holidays.

The next day I would mention this to McKenzie on his return to the mess hall, and he'd tell me that a nurse had told him that the hospital wasn't taking in new patients anymore. Apparently, the premier had stepped in and shut things down after the escape.

As I would later read in the paper, a Human Sciences Research Council study had found that there were at least ten times as many infected people as there was room for in all the country's quarantine facilities combined. Maybe that was why we weren't taking

new patients. According to the paper, the new buzzword was community-based treatment. The way I understand it, patients were staying at home and getting their pills delivered to them by specially trained health workers. There was also some new kind of mask these patients had to wear whenever there were people around.

It all sounded a bit like quitting to me. The great quarantine experiment abandoned at long last.

Anyhow, for some reason they couldn't just let us go. Those already inside quarantine facilities had to wait it out. Maybe they thought it would be bad press to have front-page pictures of infected people being released. Besides, apart from all the studies and all the calls for change, government policy was still officially to keep everyone locked up.

I didn't know any of this yet that afternoon, though. All I knew, was that the hospital seemed empty to me; that out by the gate there was very little activity. There weren't any Department of Health minibuses dropping off new patients. The comings and goings of the staff seemed to have slowed to a crawl. Even the guard in his cubicle by the gate was sitting with his chin in his hands.

All there really was, was the sun, harsh as ever, and a warm breeze that was playing a lonely game with small handfuls of dust. I lay looking at this until the shadows shifted and the breeze got stronger and started throwing around much larger scoops of the dry, red particles.

I slept a dreamless sleep through dinner and well into the night. Somewhere along the line I was woken up to take a pill. But I could have imagined it. The lines between sleeping and the waking life felt terribly fuzzy around me.

As soon as I started talking to Miss Van Vuuren, I knew that our meeting again had been inevitable. It happened out in the backyard. I had gone out late one afternoon to sit in the shade with my back against the wall of the laundry rooms when it happened.

I saw her coming out of the main building, wearing a black dress and black stockings. I smiled at her, and she walked over toward me. “Sit down,” I said when she reached me. To my surprise, she did.

“How are you?” she asked.

I couldn’t help but smile at her. “I’m okay,” I said. “I’ve had a rough ride, but I’m okay.”

“I wasn’t sure you’d be coming back, Barry.”

“I always knew I’d be back. I might even have gotten myself caught on purpose. I don’t know.”

“I missed you,” she said in a barely audible voice.

“I think I missed you too.”

She looked at me with a sad look in her eyes that I hadn’t seen before. I was frightened. Something was wrong. “Yes,” she said without thinking. It was as if something had snapped in her voice, as if the thing that gave her substance had melted away since I had last seen her.

“This is the spot where Tumi and Mazza had had their big fight,” I said after a while. “Were you here then?”

“No, but I heard about it.”

“They wrestled each other right here. I’m surprised there aren’t any bloodstains. It was one of the saddest things I’ve ever seen.”

“Barry, I’m going away in a few weeks’ time. I have resigned my job in town and I’m ending my contract with the hospital.”

“Okay . . .” I said.

“Something bad happened to me recently . . .” she said and gently bit her lip. She sighed quietly and folded her arms. I felt a shiver pass through my whole body.

“It could have been much worse, I suppose,” she said, staring toward the fence. “Still, I don’t feel I can talk about it. I’m sorry, you told me everything, and now I’m holding back.”

“It’s okay,” I said, “You don’t have to talk.”

She didn’t say anything more about it, but I knew from the tone of her voice that her faith had been shaken, and for the first time in years I felt like crying. I had to stop my mind from imagining it. Had she been robbed? Had some guy attacked her, or worse, had she been raped? I tried to banish the word from my mind.

She said that she had applied for a British visa. “It is the one good thing about being a psychologist, the whole world wants you.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Yes,” she said, absent-mindedly tracing a line on the cement with her index finger.

When we got up, she said that she would come again the next day if I wanted. “I’d like to hear what happened to you . . . if you want to tell,” she said.

“Okay, tomorrow is good,” I said. “I don’t think I have any appointments.”

She smiled at my joke and I was glad for making it.

I wondered if I should ask about what had happened to her, but I didn't feel I could.

That night, I coughed blood again. It wasn't as bad as it had been before, but I was alone in the ward, so there was no-one to notice. The blood was choking me. I wanted to scream, but I couldn't. I thought of banging the plastic cup on my bed-side drawer against the metal frame of the bed to attract attention. Before I could get that far, though, it was over. My throat was open enough for me to scream, so I screamed.

When a nurse flicked on the light, I was shocked to see how much blood had come out of me. A large, red puddle on the bed slowly dripped onto the floor. It was already darkening in colour. The nurse jabbed me in the arm with something, and soon I felt that old familiar friend driving me away in his fine black chariot. Swing low, we are going to the ballroom tonight.

In keeping with my life of strange awakenings, I woke in the emergency room in mid-morning, not sure if had dreamt the last few days. Had the police interrogation really happened? And the talk with McKenzie and Miss Van Vuuren? It could very well have been a dream. If you live your life in such small confines, one day quickly becomes like another and the patterns of succession and causation can easily run ragged. Who knows what happened when, and who cares?

Listening to me breathe through his stethoscope, Von Hansmeyer said that the news wasn't good. "Lungs do not recover from this condition," he said. Then he made me cough him up a sputum sample. Why he wanted it if he was so sure, I didn't know.

"You may have more of these events now, Barry," he said. "There is nothing we can do about it." After asking me if I was in any pain, he gave me another injection. I lied, of course.

"Okay, Barry, you need to take Vintramol tablets once a day as before. It is not how I would have wanted it, but the department is not sending us any more Efalanol."

"Why not, doc?"

"Bad management, Barry. Bad management. They say there is no money."

As I felt the drug starting to take effect, I remembered the premier and his convoy as they stood parked out beyond the fence, only a few months ago. And now that man was being mentioned as a possible candidate for president.

She did come to see me that day, like she had done once, many months before, also in the emergency room. I was awake when she came in. She was radiating about her that spicy perfume that by now was so familiar. She pulled up a chair and sat down next to the bed, her eyes much clearer than the day before.

"How are you?" she asked.

"I'll live, for a bit."

I said that it wasn't too serious. I had progressed to some late-stage condition, which was bad, but at least it wasn't like the time I had the nodular rupture. She asked if I felt up to talking and I said I did. I figured it would be crazy to let her go again.

"Anything specific on your mind?" she asked.

"My mind's like a sieve, things just flow through it."

"Nothing getting stuck?"

"I think of JD sometimes," I said. I didn't know how much I should tell her, so I didn't say anything more.

She asked if that was my friend, my roommate? I said yes.

"The police asked me about him and about you," she said. "They wanted to know if you were good friends. I didn't really know him, so I couldn't really tell them much. Come to think of it, I only saw the two of you together once."

"When he waved at you?"

"Yes."

“Oh well, that’s all over now,” I said and thought of his boyish old body in that sandy grave.

“I think they’ll keep looking for him. It was in all the newspapers. They really made him sound like a monster.”

“I wish they’d just let him be,” I said. “He was not like that at all.”

“Barry, I’m not supposed to tell you this, but they found his fingerprints on the murder weapon. They are very sure he did it.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” I said. And then I didn’t know what to say. I wanted to ask about Mazza and Sibu. Didn’t they find them? “I don’t think he did it,” I said.

“Maybe you are right,” she said and kept quiet for a long time. She kept looking at me, though, her eyes wide open and clear, with the faintest sign of mascara giving her face the look of something out of a magazine.

“Oh, it doesn’t really matter anyway,” I said. “Soon the hospital won’t be here anymore. Give it some time and no-one will give a second thought to what happened to Jonathan Cronin.”

“You may be right.”

“They’re going to shut the hospital down. The government is going to pieces. We’ve got floods and droughts everywhere. I’m not even sure you’ll be safe in England.”

“Oh Barry, you can be so gloomy sometimes.” Something about the way she said this made me think she wasn’t all that optimistic either. But maybe I was wrong, maybe it was just my own mind clouding things over again.

“But I am worried about what’s going to happen to you,” she said.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be okay. I’m not afraid of anything anymore.”

“And the past?” she asked, her voice barely audible, as it always was when she thought she was asking a serious question.

“That . . . I don’t know.” I caught myself sighing. “All that’s kind of faded since the escape. Maybe we escaped from the past, lost it like you lose a police car chasing you.”

“Oh Barry, you only get to escape when you get really old and develop dementia,” she said.

I didn’t know what to say. I figured out too late that she meant it as a joke.

“Okay then, I have to get going,” she said. “I can’t come tomorrow, but maybe the next day.” Then, as she got up to leave, she touched my forearm with her fingertips, gently, so gently that I almost wasn’t sure it had really happened.

Either way, it was enough.

I moved back to the ward the next morning. That doesn't mean I felt any better, though. I knew that my body had turned a corner and that the finishing line was near. I don't know how I knew this, but it was obvious to me.

I had turned off the main road onto a quiet street in some industrial area. Soon I'd have to knock at the door of some warehouse, where an electric door would open and then close behind me, never to open again. Anyway, that is how I saw it as I lay on my bed that morning, drifting in and out of sleep. It wasn't a sad or depressing thought, just a fact, a given, a part of the script I knew I would have to play out.

A nurse checked up on me and got me to go downstairs for lunch. I ate only a few bites of the mushy, grey stuff they had dished up for us. I sat with McKenzie, but we didn't speak. When I left, I told him, "See you later." He just grunted and lifted his knife a bit to acknowledge my leaving.

I could hardly make it back up afterward. It seemed my muscles had stopped obeying my brain. They seemed stiff and unwieldy, as if they were already half dead. Still, even though I was tired as hell – they had given me some more pills – I didn't want to go back to sleep again. All the lying about of the morning had given me a headache which was lingering like a dark, menacing shape in the corner of my eye. As soon as I lay down, it would pounce.

So I pulled up the chair and sat staring out my ward window like I had done so many times before. Outside, the sun was pounding the wasteland with such a brightness as I had not seen for some time.

I sat and looked at the pale, cloudless dome that covered the earth and not for the first time I was struck by just how empty it was. I considered opening the window, but I knew it would be too hot. From the feeble way in which the wind shouldered the waning leaves of the remaining throwaway, I knew it would offer no respite.

I felt a bit ill, but deciding to ignore it I eventually felt myself drifting off again, my eyelids dropping dark curtains over the burning veld.

I thought of my conversation with Miss Van Vuuren the previous day. That, too, seemed as if it had happened in a long-ago dream. I knew it hadn't been a dream, though. It was as real as any interaction between one human being and another could be. And she did touch my arm, however little or how much that might have meant. Does it matter if reality sometimes seems like a dream?

Many sleepy minutes later, slightly dazed and with a yawn welling up in me, I opened my eyes for no real reason I can think of. I saw a white speck coming over the sun-stroked horizon and slowly start slipping down the ridge. I watched it for a few moments, just a wavy spec moving down almost imperceptibly. My heart beat a bit faster, though my eyelids remained heavy.

"She's only coming tomorrow," I thought. "Surely it can't be her. You must be dreaming." And then the yawn that had been threatening, overpowered me. I wondered if I was yawning more as my body's ability to absorb oxygen diminished. Relax, I told myself, and felt the beginnings of a dream pulling at some outermost reach of my consciousness.

I looked back out at the white speck, though. Then, as it wound down the slope, I felt a sudden coldness pass over me like an electric shock. The cord by which that dream was tugging at my mind had been cut. I was wide awake and confused. It was not a Hyundai, but a Corolla, and I knew immediately that I'd seen it before.

In the front seat, a man sat up very straight, his shirt an immaculately bright white. Next to him sat a much smaller figure, hardly visible due to the angle of the light. They were about a hundred metres from the gates. I couldn't really be certain yet, it didn't make sense after all. It could just be the heat, I thought. One of those weird hallucinations brought on by heat stroke. Had I been out walking that morning? Had I taken too many pills again? Surely it couldn't be. Surely this was that dream starting, surely they weren't really out there?

I closed my eyes. In the ward, too, it was getting hot. I wondered if they'd be gone when I looked again, wiped away like the memories of a dream. Please God, I whispered.

I wiped my forehead. It was drenched. When I opened my eyes, the world wasn't reconfigured, but exactly the same, except that it had turned wet and glassy.

I felt a vine clenching at my throat as the car stopped and the man stepped out, stretching his arms and looking about him. His large forehead was unmistakable. He leant down to the car window and said something to the woman. Then he got up and stood looking at the building, his shirt now a white blur in my muddled vision. I felt my jaw tightening. Damn you, mama's boy, damn you!

When I looked again, Sarah was closing the car door behind her . . . a girl in a light blue dress, a girl with sandy hair, a girl I had known once. Together they walked over to the guardhouse. How small and stocky she now seemed next to him. How unlike the girl I had kept alive in my memories.

No, no, no. It cannot be. She was dead. There was a funeral. It was in the paper. All of it was impossible. The universe doesn't just change its rules like that . . .

But deep inside I must have known, I must have known all along, and that is why something cracked deep in the core of that thing I might have once called my heart.

When the dark-haired nurse eventually came into my room to say in his nasal twang that I had visitors, I told him to leave. "I don't want to see them. Tell them to go away. Tell them I'm too sick. Tell them they do not belong here. Tell them to go back to Neverland."

He just stood there. "But Mister Barry . . ."

"Go! Fuck!" I shouted at him. "I don't want to see them! I have a right to decide who I see and who I don't. No matter what you do, you are not going to change my mind."

He slowly turned around and left, looking back at me one last time with a look that said, you're crazy.

To the idiot's credit, though, he did get rid of them. Not that I remembered looking out of the window again that afternoon. Actually, I have no idea what happened to the rest of that day. It has disappeared, like things disappear when you drink too much whisky and then drink some more.

I guess I just stayed in the ward. Maybe I buried my head under my pillow. Maybe I screamed like an angry child. Maybe I was paralysed with shock, or maybe I went about my business like any other afternoon. I just don't know. The memory has slipped my mind.

I do remember looking out of the window much, much later and feeling surprised to find them gone. The dusky air out there was scattered with clouds of red dust. The wind had picked up and the wastes seemed even emptier than before. Everything was terribly quiet.

Later that night I thought I heard Miss Van Vuuren's voice saying, "Maybe they were never here." It sounded so real that I got a fright and sat up to look if she was there. But of course she was not. It was just me in an empty ward, in a decaying hospital, in a mad country, on an over-heated planet, losing my mind.

The next day I didn't get up for breakfast. I just lay there slumped in a stupor, as if I was one of those lobotomised vegetables you find in real asylums. In a brief moment of clarity, it crossed my mind that finally my soul had also descended to those cavernous doldrums where my body had been drifting about for so long.

I'd probably had stayed like that all day had Von Hansmeyer not burst in, booming, "Good afternoon, Barry!" He flung open the windows and told me to get up and to get dressed. I couldn't care less, so I ignored him. "Come on," he said, standing next to my bed with his hands on his hips. "Miss Van Vuuren is waiting for you."

"I want one of those white pills you gave me," I said.

"What white pills?"

"That big one you gave me that day I was in your office."

"Oh, that," he said and turned around to leave. "She's waiting for you in the room next to my office. Don't make the nice lady wait."

He just assumed that I'd obey, and, as always, the old German was right. So I got up on a kind of auto-pilot, the thought flashing through my mind that, at least, there could not be so much of this "getting up business" left to do. The way things just went on and on suddenly made me feel terribly tired.

I washed my face and was surprised by how familiar the face in the mirror looked to me. It might have gotten thinner and a bit burnt, and it hadn't had a decent shave in months, but the lines were still the same. For all that had happened, it was still the same guy looking back at me as ten years before. Somehow it seemed inappropriate.

She was writing something in a file when I got to the room. Behind her the window was letting in a soft breeze. It had cooled down substantially since the previous day. I sat down, and something in her face told me that she was smiling at me behind her mask. She said hello and I nodded back at her.

“I heard you had some visitors yesterday, Barry,” she said.

“Did I?”

“Yes, so I was told. And I take it you weren’t very happy to see them.”

I didn’t say anything.

“It was Sarah, wasn’t it?”

I dropped my head into my hands and heard her sigh the gentlest of sighs.

“I was afraid of that,” she said quietly.

We sat in silence like that for a long time. She scribbled something on the page in front of her. I just sat there, not thinking.

“I brought these for you,” she said and took out a pile of notebooks from her handbag. “I saw them in Von Hansmeyer’s office after you ran away and thought I’d better keep them for you. There are also some new ones, if you want them.”

“Did you read them?”

“Yes, I did,” she said, lowering her eyes.

“That’s okay,” I said. “I don’t really mind.”

She shoved the pile of books over to my side of the table. Then she took out a pack of four brand new black pencils and handed that over as well.

“After all that, you’re still encouraging me?”

“So, do you know how you got infected?” she asked.

“Which version do you want?” When she didn’t answer, I went on, “There is really no way of knowing. Hell knows, it could have been anywhere. Maybe on the train – I used to take the train to work.”

“It is so random, isn’t it?”

“I suppose.”

“I’m sorry this happened to you, Barry. You really didn’t deserve this. You just had some very, very bad luck.”

“It is okay, you don’t have to be sorry.”

“At least Sarah is still alive,” she said, and she was right.

For some reason, though, just then, I thought of JD lying in his shallow grave. I wanted to tell her. I couldn’t, though. I knew that she would have to tell Von Hansmeyer or the police, and that they would then go out there to dig him up. No, that was not going to happen.

“Yes, I suppose Sarah is still out there.”

“And you are sure you don’t want to see her again?”

I looked at her and thought of how I could explain that Sarah and I were in different worlds, that we’d pass by each other like ghosts pass the living.

“Maybe you think I’m going mad. I don’t know. Maybe things happen to you when you are locked up in a place like this. Maybe you lose your mind . . . Who knows? But I think when you’re halfway to the other side and you get to look back like I did, you can maybe see things in their rightful place in ways you can’t when you’re out there in the real world.”

“But the past,” she said, “I mean the past as it really was, surely some of that is worth holding on to?”

“What, you want the straight story? . . . You want to hear that it was all a lie? That I was just an ordinary guy in a dead-end job when I got sick for absolutely no reason? That Sarah was never my girlfriend? That she certainly wouldn’t let me sleep with her, let alone make her pregnant? That I made it all up?”

I could feel my voice giving way as I asked this. I fully expected her to say yes, she does, but she didn’t. She just sat there and looked at me as if she was trying to understand something with her eyes.

“I think I understand,” she said eventually. How much she understood, I didn’t know. That I’d managed to put some kind of explanation on things had come as a surprise to me. I wasn’t sure any of it made sense. At least it felt like understanding, even if it was shot through with holes.

“It is not punishment then,” she said softly.

“No, I guess not. I guess I’m not that lucky. I guess there is no rhyme or reason to it. It just is what it is.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Barry,” she said, and I thought for a moment that she was going to cry.

That was the last time I saw Miss Van Vuuren. I walked her down and at the front door she said that she’d try and come again in two or three days’ time. That never happened, though. I watched her walking off toward her car, slipping the mask off and dangling it from her hand as she walked. I turned to go back up to the ward.

I was out of my stupor, but I still wasn’t feeling great.

Back in the ward, I took one of the new notebooks and started writing.

It was in the next few days that the patients started dropping like flies in a snow storm. There was an outbreak of an unknown opportunistic infection they couldn't trace. We were told not to eat in the mess hall, and then not to visit each other's wards. I think they suspected the water supply, but they couldn't tell us not to drink, and they weren't going to buy us bottled water. They boiled large urns full of water and left it in the mess hall where we could come and fill bottles they had given us. It didn't help, though.

Sitting at my ward window, I watched them loading bodies into ambulances and taking them away. Whatever it was, I seemed to be immune to it. That doesn't mean I wasn't sick, though. I was growing weaker and weaker by the day.

Then one morning, a few days later, a nurse dropped a letter in my room. It was from Miss Van Vuuren. She said that she was sorry she didn't get to come see me again. "As you read this," she wrote, "I'll probably be on my way to Pretoria. I have to finalise my arrangements from there. If everything goes according to plan, I will be leaving for London within weeks."

She gave me the address of a place in Richmond where she would be staying. "In case you want to write to me," she said. I felt strangely touched by this courtesy. After all, if anything, I was in the first place a patient. Sure, she knew that I wouldn't harass her with letters, or turn up in London knocking on her door and looking for a place to stay, but still, the gesture left me deeply moved.

I also felt a sense of relief. For the preceding days I had constantly been scanning the ridge, waiting for her to come back. Knowing that she wouldn't be coming, felt like loss, but at least I could stop waiting.

I wrote more and more in those days. For whom, I cannot say. Whenever I felt strong enough, I would get up and put pen to paper . . .

I hardly spoke to anyone. Besides, there was hardly anyone left to talk to.

McKenzie did come to see me one last time. He told me about how the police had quizzed him about JD, and how he had told them that he and Meintjies had travelled alone. They had no trouble believing him. He had that kind of face. I didn't tell him about the fingerprints. Like a lot of other things, it didn't matter anymore.

After a while, we didn't know what to say to each other. We didn't have much more in common than our shared past, and neither of us felt much like talking about that. In reality, he had been friends with Meintjies and JD . . . I just happened to be there as well. No matter.

Then, one morning, as I looked out the ward window, I saw that the large iron gates were open. They just stood there, abandoned, miraculously already having the look of disuse about them. There was no-one in the guard house either.

I went out into the corridor and found a tall, thin patient whose name I forget coming out of the bathroom. I asked him what was up and he said that the hospital is closing down and that they are moving us to another one.

I got hold of Von Hansmeyer as he came rushing up the stairs.

"Excuse me, Doctor, what is this about closing down?"

"Yes, you must get ready, Barry, the busses are coming for you at three o'clock this afternoon," he said without slowing down.

I trailed him to his office. When I eventually caught up with him, he was standing by his desk, packing papers into a cardboard box. "Yes, Barry," he said.

"That white pill . . ." I started saying, but he cut me off before I could finish.

"Ah, Barry, it was a placebo," he said while rummaging on his desk, "It was a placebo."

I wanted to ask why, but I couldn't speak. So I left him there.

Later, when I saw the Department of Health minibuses pulling in through the open gate, I realised that I would need supplies if I wanted to stay. So I once again struggled down the stairs. In the kitchen I found boxes with unopened packs of rice, bread, and other food packed on the tables. There was no-one there, so I helped myself to two loafs of bread and a large can of apricot jam. I put all of it into a small box and took it up to my ward. In all the commotion, no-one gave me a second look.

Then I went to hide in one of the cupboards in a storeroom at the furthest end of the hospital.

After what felt like four or five hours, I came back out. I knew immediately that they were gone. Apart from the distant sounds of coughing, the hospital had always been a quiet place. Now, however, it was deathly quiet. The evacuation had been quick and thorough. There were still beds and linen in the wards, but all life had been extracted. I was a walking corpse inside the rotting carcass of a hospital. In time, they would no doubt be back for the beds, I thought.

The echoing corridors were eerily dark. I went into a ward I didn't know and tried the light switch. It didn't work, and neither did any of the other switches. All the windows had been closed.

So I went to my ward, checked if my supplies were still there, and lay down on my bed. I was utterly alone.

That night I dreamt that I woke up and once again heard the small orchestra playing in the ballroom. As before, I was wearing a badly fitting suit. I was standing by the window on the landing by the stairs. Outside, the world was covered with snow.

Then I was in the ballroom, and this time it was full of people. I saw Mazza in a finely tailored suit, standing with a drink in hand talking to Meintjies. Dugan winked at me as he led an unfamiliar girl with long black hair onto the dance floor. I saw Von

Hansmeyer standing by a giant fire, poking in it with a long, golden stick. On the balcony, the man who played the violin made me think of the poet Virgil.

As I once again stood by the large window that looked out on the snow and woods beyond it, I heard Miss van Vuuren saying “Barry?” next to me.

“But you’ve gone to Pretoria,” I said.

“Well, I’m here,” she said. As before, she was dressed all in white, her shoulders bare, and gloves up to her elbows, her lips red, her hair tied back. I looked down at my own ill-fitting suit and she said it’s okay. “It doesn’t matter.”

She offered me her hand and I remember feeling scared that I wouldn’t be able to move, that the lethargy of dreams, the moving as if stuck in sand, would take hold of me. But it didn’t.

From the balcony, a Balkan waltz filled the ballroom with a sweeping melody, every now and again flirting at the edge of madness and dissonance. We danced, and it was intoxicating. And as we rose and fell, I saw that all those around us were also dancing, and that, like me, their clothes didn’t fit them and that their bodies seemed weak, and that some of them had injuries, and that there was even a trickle of blood coming from Dugan’s neck.

None of the pain mattered, though. We danced, and it was as if all the world had fallen from us like dirt, as if the ballroom itself was about to take off and blur the snowy landscape outside the window into an indistinguishable mess.

When I woke, I felt a deep happiness inside me. I knew that as long as I could hang on to that dream, I would feel that warm glow. So, I wrote it down, like I wrote down all the others.

All that day, I was alone. When I felt strong enough, I wrote in the notebooks. The rest of the time I just sat staring out at the ridge. I expected them to come back to fetch the linen and the beds at any time. No-one came, though. It was just the open gate and the red dust being blown about, ever so gently.

When I felt strong, I walked around in the empty hospital. I opened windows here and there. Already the air was getting stale. I didn't bother closing any of the windows behind me. In fact, I felt a strange sense of satisfaction when coming across a room where I had been earlier, and finding the floors covered in a thin layer of dust. I'd sit down in some of these rooms and feel a deep sense of peace.

At night the hospital was very dark. I moved my chair as close to the window as it could go and looked at the stars. I once went looking for candles, but I didn't keep looking very long. The darkness suited me fine.

By the third day, I opened a tap and there was nothing. I tried other taps and they, too, were empty. The game was up. It didn't upset or surprise me, though. I had expected it and it seemed as ordinary as all the strange things I had been dreaming.

This morning, as the sun climbs to its zenith, I look out of my ward window one last time. The open gates still seem strange to me, but I like them being open. It's as if a painting I've been looking at for years has been changed. I didn't like the change at first, but in time I've come around to it. Once we had a locked gate keeping people in, now we have an open gate no one passes through. I like it more and more.

I stand for a long minute facing the ward window one last time. I leave the notebooks behind on the bedside drawer and trudge down the echoing stairs. The front door is locked. I rattle the knob. I give it a kick, but it doesn't budge.

"Let it be," I say out loud.

So I open a window and climb out into the sweltering day.

When I get to the gates, I stand still in that space that had been closed for so long. I try to sense something of the openness around me. I try to feel some significance, but I feel no elation, no sense of fulfilment, nothing. Around me, the silence is complete. The sun burns into my neck and on my head. I look back at the empty hospital once more and then start climbing the ridge.

I do not look back when I reach the top of the ridge. I don't even look sideways. I just walk on down to the road. Already the heat is shrinking the world around me, closing down possibilities. The fabric of things is caving in around me, folding all existence down to a narrow tunnel.

When I reach the blacktop, I can feel the tar burning through the soles of my shoes. I decide to ignore it. I turn to the right and start walking down the road.

I trudge on. It is hard to tell how far I've gone. From the corners of my vision everything starts going a reddish black, until it fills all in front of me. My knees melt away slowly, giving way like soft metal.

I do not notice hitting the ground. Suddenly I become aware that I am lying on my back. Beneath me the road is strangely hot, as if it is burning. Lying here, I feel my lungs

filling up with something thick and glue-like. I want to cough. I know I should cough, but I cannot. My body simply doesn't respond any more.

As I lie waiting, I hear a soft whirring sound, and I feel a rush of terror shooting through me like a last convulsion. It is getting louder and louder. I know it is the car from my nightmare, the car with the blue plastic round its wheels. It gets even louder and louder, and then it is next to me. It stops. A car door opens and slams shut. I open my eyes, and against the pale, radiated sky, I see a man bending down over me, a long scar running down the side of his face.

"It's okay," he tells me. "Don't worry. There is nothing to be afraid of. There is nothing on the other side." And as he says this, it is as if a great load is lifted. I know that I am dying, and finally, I am glad for the cold indifference of it.

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The final scene in the novel is partly based on a scene in Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.