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The Road to Absalom

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**COMPULSORY DECLARATION**

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.

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## Abstract – The Road to Absalom

*The Road to Absalom* is set in contemporary South Africa, where, for much of the predominantly young population, the country's *ancien regime* is little more than a childhood memory.

David is a young articled clerk living a hedonistic and carefree life with his model girlfriend, Georgina, in Cape Town. When the entire family of the Xhosa chief of a remote rural valley is murdered he is sent in search of any remaining heirs. The new chief would be a lucrative client for the law firm. The search begins at the site of the massacre. David discovers that the only surviving heir, Absalom, has been missing for several years. He picks up the trail at Absalom's old university, where an ex-lecturer tells him about Absalom's early political consciousness (dismay at his family's collaboration with the white regime), his increasing rebelliousness, and his eventual disappearance. Local gangsters tell David more about Absalom's life as a criminal and an exile from his own family, circumstances which led him move to Soweto. David drives across the interior of South Africa to Soweto, but does not find Absalom. His contact there arranges a meeting with Absalom's mentor and protector – Pius, a chief drug-smuggler resident in Swaziland.

The hours of driving give David the time and perspective to reflect on his life in Cape Town: his dysfunctional relationship with Georgina, his fixation on his mixed-race high-school lover, Angeline, his unwanted job and his ambivalent relationship with his family. He suspects that his supposedly convenient life has been constructed from fear or self-deception, and he is forced to re-evaluate his motivations.

The meeting with Pius uncovers broad issues involving local and global politics that have contributed to Absalom's family's massacre and to his disappearance. However, Absalom has left to train as a Sangoma. David drives to Durban, where another sangoma gives him directions to the initiate's retreat in the Drakensberg mountains. He finds Absalom's spiritual master, a secretive bushman shaman, who explains that Absalom had abandoned his spiritual studies when he was told to do so by a powerful Spirit of nature. With the shaman's help David experiences a vision of Absalom's new hide-away on the coast. In the morning David follows the directions of his vision until he finds Absalom. The pair combine their knowledge: it emerges that their respective pasts have locked them into their present trajectories. David's family and his law firm (as well as a giant construction company and the World Bank) are involved in the events leading up to the massacre, while the past betrayals of the chief's family helped bring about their deaths. However, the pair abstain from the roles described for them by history, choosing instead to construct their own responses in an attempt to continue towards self-determining lives.

## CHAPTER 1--FORT CAMPBELL

The men from the morgue are late and the bodies are stiffening and starting to smell. Policemen sit around smoking cigarettes, complaining about the morgue workers. Smoke drifts around the airless chamber. 'They are drunk,' says one policeman. 'They are lazy,' says another. 'No, they are picking up AIDS bodies from across the valley,' says a third. They glance around restlessly. Until the men from the morgue arrive, this pile of bodies is their problem, their responsibility.

The corpses lie in a corner of the cement-floored courtyard that separates the Fort Campbell police station from the holding cells – two cement blocks where criminals are held overnight for petty offences such as public drunkenness, dagga smoking or wife-beating, and where more serious offenders are detained until they are transferred to the prison in Umtata. The policemen have dragged a table and three chairs into the courtyard. The bodies need to be watched so that they are not pecked at by crows or burrowed into by cockroaches or used as nests for maggots and wasp larva. The bodies need to be watched so that prisoners do not

spit on the corpses of their enemies, so that policemen are not tempted to cut off body-parts for sale to the muti-men, so that prisoners know that when their time comes, when their corpse is lying face-down (a bit of a misnomer in this case since none have any remaining face to speak of) on the concrete in a pool of congealed blood and shit they will be watched over by the forces of law and order so that their corporeal remains will not be violated and desecrated in death as they no doubt were in life, in this very prison. The policemen taunt the prisoners with their cigarette smoke. '*Gee ve ons assesblief 'n entjie meneer,*' is the cry of the prisoners. '*Net een.*'

'Clean up the blood, my brother,' says one policeman, in deep resonant Xhosa.

'No my brother, you clean it up, I'm tired.'

'Tired? We are all tired. It's been a long day. I'm just saying please clean up the blood. There is a white lawyer on his way here. We can't have him seeing our house in such a mess.'

'Well if you're so concerned why don't you clean it up yourself? I don't see why white lawyers can't live with a little blood just like we can.'

'Ag, you donkey. Fine. You see what happens. He is a rich English whitey from Cape Town. Probably a moffie. He will puke and pass out when he sees this. You want vomit and a passed-out umlungu in our courtyard as well as this mess? Hey?'

'Fine. I'll call Yoliswa. Yoliswa! Come here! Clean up this mess!' Yoliswa scuttles over and mops up the blood; blood stains her knees red.

The courtyard has one heavily barred window that looks onto the front yard of the station through which the policemen watch a white BMW crunch over the gravel and swish to a halt. A young white man steps out. He is tall and lightly built, but he carries himself

with the air of one who has spent plenty of time at the gym, at the hair-stylist, in the Parisian label shops. He wears the informal clothes that whiteys like to wear: denims, sandals and a short-sleeved shirt sporting a gaudy floral pattern. As if he is too rich to dress properly in a suit and shoes. His dark brown hair is spiked up unnaturally and glistens in the sun. His face is long and finely featured, with pale skin and a dusting of freckles. He has hooded, sleepy eyes whose colour changes according to the surrounding light – sometimes green, sometimes a cloudy, greyish blue, sometimes streaked with hazel like a tiger’s eye. His expression seems to be permanently lugubrious, although those that know him well would detect a sparkle in his eyes that betrays his penchant for farce, for sensual pleasure mixed with a dash of pain. His eyes scan the police building and its rural surrounds with a mixture of interest and disdain; his beaky nose rises and sniffs the air. He seems pleased with its rural freshness, the odours of dry grass and cow dung and summer flowers.

The whitey steps up to the police station. The captain emerges from the office to greet him, a short bovine man with dark hairless skin and a noncommittal air about him. ‘Good morning, Mr Barendse,’ he says, his Xhosa accent only slight and his voice high for someone of such portly stature.

‘Good morning. Please, call me David.’

‘How are you, David?’

‘I am well. How are you?’

‘We are well, thank you, except for all the dead bodies packed into our little police station. Three of them won’t even fit into the fridges. We are waiting for the men from the morgue to come and take them away.’

‘I see. I’m sorry for the loss to your community.’

The captain glances around as if he is hunting swallows. 'Indeed, it is a great loss. It is quite tragic the way human life is wasted. And right after Sipiwo's funeral. He will be sorely missed. Sipiwo was a great leader.' He looks back at David, his yellowed eyes moist and gleaming and steady. Fort Campbell is in the domain of the chief, but while the chief is dead and no heir has been declared the captain is the highest-ranking member of the community.

David asks immediately: 'Would it be possible to see the bodies?'

The captain looks pensive. Should he begin granting privileges to the stranger so soon? 'Well,' he says, 'there are various procedures. One cannot just arrive here and start looking at bodies.'

'I see. Should we begin with a cup of coffee then?'

The captain smiles benevolently. 'Of course. Yoliswa!'

Over coffee David declines to discuss the case. 'Let us at least enjoy our coffee,' he says. They discuss the weather, the poor state of the Umtata-Fort Campbell road, the lack of funding available for the police. The captain takes small sips of his coffee, dips and chews his rusk slowly, like a chameleon. David is complimentary about the state of the police station and sympathetic about budget restraints and the mammoth tasks faced by the police. The captain says he is pleased that a real lawyer has been sent from Cape Town to help clarify things. After all, there can be so much confusion in these parts.

Fifteen bodies have been squeezed into the station's six fridges, each compartment designed to fit one person. The unlucky three in the courtyard could not be crammed in. The first fridge holds the bodies of the youngest. Nkosikasi, the smallest girl, is wedged into a corner. She is turned face-down, her braids soaked in blood. Her white dress is patched with

red and flecked with droplets. The other two children, Maverick and Mbulelo, lie side-by-side, their shoulders climbing the stainless-steel walls of their cell. Mbulelo is fat; his flesh spills from under his red t-shirt against which the blood is stained almost black. Maverick is as thin as Mbulelo is fat, his spindly legs twisted awkwardly by carelessly placed feet. The next fridge houses the grandmothers, the mother of the chief and the mother of the chief's wife. Side by side their frail old bodies seem to have slipped into death more easily, more rapidly. Their skin is grey, their limbs solid.

The third fridge holds only one body, that of the chief's obese younger brother Monde. Face-down, his rump sticks into the air, his body strains against his blood-drenched clothes. Monde, says the captain, was a great man. He quietly helped the chief in his most difficult counsels and brought much joy to the family with his easy laughter and diplomacy. Monde was next in line for the chieftaincy. Now another replacement will have to be found.

The fourth fridge holds the only surviving son of the chief, Mxolisi, and his only son, Khokhetso. Side-by-side father and son are barely distinguishable in death, both wearing suits, both blessed with the same rotund belly, both lying face-down against the cold grey steel. David winces and closes the door. The fifth fridge holds the sons of the chief's brothers, Themba and Maseko. Even from behind the resemblance between Sipiwo and his nephews is apparent, the same barrel chest, the muscular arms, the sloping shoulders. The last fridge holds Sipiwo's only daughter, Nomhle, and his oldest grand-child, Nkosinathi. Nomhle, thinks David, must have been strangely beautiful in life; even in death she is still strongly, perfectly formed. Nkosinathi has inherited her good looks: the proud jaw, the hooded almond-shaped eyes, the high cheekbones. David slams the last door shut. The remaining bodies, he is told, are in the courtyard. Sipiwo's grand-nephews, Moses, Joseph

and Thando. He must be prepared for the smell, since they are lying in the sun. It is inevitable in this heat. David asks if he may light a cigarette. Of course, says the captain. David drags hungrily at the nicotine.

This is David's first encounter with death, except for a body he once passed on the N3 driving from Durban to Johannesburg. That body looked like someone sleeping; only the crowd of angry Zulus and the flashing lights gave it away. He decides to finish his cigarette outside. The bodies in the courtyard can wait. The smoke floats into the clear sky. The police station is on the edge of town, beyond its squat buildings hills roll into the horizon, emerald-green and dotted with huts, fenceless and roadless. Behind the station the village of Fort Campbell hums its quiet tune of bakkie-engines, chickens and Xhosa chatter. The words are complacent and without shock. David watches young boys lead a team of yoked oxen out of the village and into the hills. Were their fathers the murderers?

He returns to the captain's office before he moves on to the nephews in the courtyard. He sits down; his mind is clear but his stomach is weak. All this death feels distant, as if he has walked into a news bulletin or some Hollywood flick. Yet he finds himself unable to move. He procrastinates – goes to the toilet, checks his phone for messages, writes a text to Angeline. He does not mention the police or the corpses to her, just the weather and the hills and the cows. She will be surprised to hear from him. Since their last, bitter argument (she outraged that he suggested they have an affair, he righteously indignant that their relationship had always, in one way or another, been covert, that in fact secrecy was the element that heated her blood from luke-warm to scorching) he has only contacted her under duress or in moments of panic. The captain returns to the office and sits down.

'I'm sorry that you have to see this,' he says.

‘It’s work.’

They both nod and stare out the window at a young intombi rolling a tyre down the road, kicking up dust.

David sips his third cup of coffee. ‘Captain Mahlabane, of course I have come here to do more than just look at dead bodies.’ The captain nods, draws breath. ‘I need a clearer picture of the murder. You perhaps have a list of the deceased? Names, identification numbers, ages and so on? It would be useful for my investigation.’

The captain drums the desk, rubs his chin. ‘Yes, yes, I see what you mean. Unfortunately we have no such list as yet. In the chaos we have only had time to retrieve the bodies and secure the site of the murders.’ His eyes rest on David, careful.

‘I see, of course. What about weapons? Have you found any potential murder weapons? The newspapers said that automatic rifles were used to gun down the house, but that the occupants were executed with pistols. Have these weapons been found?’

‘No, that is all conjecture. The rows of bullets lodged in the walls were from the AK47 rifle. That rifle is fully automatic so it was assumed that the single shots that killed the victims were from a different gun, a revolver or a pistol. But we have found no guns, we have no evidence.’

‘Ah. Yes. Of course all these details will emerge in time. Perhaps you could help me with something else. The victims had been attending the chief’s funeral that weekend.’

‘Yes.’

‘And Monde was the heir to the chieftaincy?’

‘Yes.’

‘But now Monde is now dead. Who is the next heir?’

‘Ah, yes, the question on everybody’s mind. That will have to wait until we have a complete list of victims. If any of Sipiwo’s family remains they will take on the chieftaincy. If not the committee in Bisho will elect a new chief from another family. We will have to wait and see what happens.’

They finish their coffee in silence. ‘Shall we move on?’ says David. The captain gestures towards the door.

The three policemen are still in the courtyard. The criminals in the holding cells are shouting: Umlungu! Umlungu! Ha – inkwenkwe! Their hands grip the bars of the cell door. Inkwenkwe! The policemen laugh. David does not. He has had a house-maid, he knows what *inkwenkwe* means. Boy, uncircumcised, not a man, a womanly man. His thoughts rise up: get a real job you inkwenkwe policemen, you inkwenkwe criminals. Living off the fat of the land, the work of the people, money for jam, money for free. Ha! In the corner lies an outline of three bodies covered in black plastic bags. One of the policemen rises and removes the covering. There is silence from the cells. David looks to the sky and notices swallows hunting insects, gathering. The three bodies are almost headless. These wasted lives. Nothing new: since Amarava gave birth to the Second People, tears have been shed for the fruits of war, for the death of the first-born here in the land of the Xhosa tribes. Just the new result of an old game. He turns on his heel and leaves. He will not find the answer here.

Back down the gravel road, churning up hot dust and stones, rock ‘n roll blasts from his speakers. He wants to hide. He feels bound for the graveyard. Heavy clouds are rolling in from the east, from the Indian Ocean, from India, laden with spice and monsoon. Indian Creedence: a novel mixture? Moleena! Where you going to? Moleena! Where you going to? Aaah! If Fort Campbell is an impossibility, what will Bisho be? On the way he will visit

the site of the murders. If the captain was silent, perhaps the bullet-torn house and blood-stained gravel will speak.

Zuraida (Simon's cute secretary who always wears a head-scarf, a Gucci watch and a coquettish smile on her forbidden lips) has given him directions, carefully typed out for his blue case-file. A few kilometres out of Fort Campbell he turns into a narrow track that descends into a valley and winds up the next ridge, leading to Sphiwo's house. But soon the road dwindles to a rough cattle-track and at the bottom of the valley a muddy stream bars his BMW. This is what happens, he thinks, when you drive a German car in Africa. He consults his map; the house is just over the ridge. He has no desire to return to the station and beg a lift in the captain's bakkie. He weighs up the risks: if he leaves the car here and walks, what are the chances that it will be here when he returns? As Mandoza said, fifty-fifty. He grabs his bottle of Valpre, packs his valuables into his shoulder-bag (phone, wallet, camera, ID book, driver's licence, maps, CDs, radio-face, the blue case-file) and sets out. A pool of mud might stop his city car, but it will not stop him.

The alarm sounds, click-click. He hops from stone to stone across the mud, clinging onto reeds for balance; he does not want to spoil his new shoes. No more air-conditioning. Here at the bottom of the valley the heat is wet and heavy and sweat springs up on his skin. He rolls up his jeans and pushes up the hill. Beyond the stream the path is even rougher, strewn with rocks and cattle dung, overgrown with grass that tickles his shins. From time to time he turns to check: his car is still there. The chorus of insects is loud out here; they whirr and screech and crick in a rough cacophony. But the dead heavy air is silent: it makes no noise on the grass; the bushes stand silent, angry, waiting for wind.

The walking reminds him of going camping with his father and some of his buddies through the Soutpansberge when he was a young boy. Their faces under the khaki hats would turn red with exertion, their ex-rugby-playing frames would struggle up the stony hillsides, the beer-boeps heaving under the strain. But they would show him waterfalls hidden behind walls of thorn trees; they would sleep in caves where by moonlight they would lie on their backs and tell stories of the San paintings on the ceiling. They would catch trout with their hands and boast about their cleverness. They woke each morning before sunrise to plan their path for the day over a hissing kettle. They always seemed to know where they were going: 'It's only twenty k's to that rock, then we can head down from there,' or 'If we kloof that river we'll reach the look-out spot by tonight, boet'. 'Lekker'. Poring over the map, they always asked David's advice even though, in retrospect, he knows they never used it. But their faces were earnest. He remembers the walls of those caves, covered in rock paintings: elephants, eland, hunters, women with huge rumps running in packs, old men with shaggy hair bent over double, sneezing.

Now he tracks his own path, cutting across the veld where the road meanders around boulders and fences and stands of trees. He stops at the top of the ridge, the highest point overlooking the Fort Campbell valley and the Mnanzi river. A gentle breeze blows here, calming the insects. The valley below him is wide and green, the river fat and winding through low hills. To the west the sides of the valley steepen, and the river appears, rushing and clear, from a deep rocky gorge. Looking towards the western edge of the ridge, towards the Southern Drakensberg, he can see Sipiwo's house, overlooking the lands of his chieftaincy. On the eastern edge is Monde's kraal, smaller and old-fashioned, facing the distant blue stripe of Indian Ocean. Far to the south, across the valley, he can see the village

of Fort Campbell perched on its hilltop. To the north hills roll to the horizon, the valleys criss-crossed by cattle-tracks, the hilltops sometimes dotted with kraals where the red earth shines through the blanket of green. Three Peregrine falcons circle high overhead. David starts to sing under his breath: 'Ooh I heard it through the grape-vine, not much longer would you be mine...'

He re-joins the road. Sipiwo's house is now visible. Not a 'house' so much as a kraal. The main building is made of modern brick and plaster, but the fence is in the ancient style of wooden poles wrapped in thorn bushes and the houses of the wives are thatched rondavels. Cows low, un milked, in the cattle-kraals. His stomach knots, he is nervous. Why? The killers are gone. The bodies have been removed. Only the blood remains. Two police cars are parked outside. They are smarter than he: they bring bakkies. A small troop of policemen waits outside the gate. They watch him walking up, their heads unmoved, following every step. Two of them carry automatic rifles slung around their necks and rows of bullets around their chests.

He reaches the gate. The guardians are impassive; they do not greet him. *Molweni*, he says. A short fat sergeant emerges, swaying on his barrel legs.

'Molo buti.'

'Molo. Unjani?'

'Ndisaphila nkosi. Unjani wena?'

'Ndisaphila nkosi. Ufuna ntoni?'

David shows his business card. The sergeant studies it; his fat eyebrows join into a ridge of flesh, creased in concentration.

'Yiza,' he says, and waddles back into the compound. David follows.

Inside the kraal are more policemen and a voluptuous young police-woman. She holds a baton. Whom will she beat with it? The sergeant guides them through the silent compound, past the cattle-kraals and the wives' huts. The chief's house is fenced with police tape. David sees the rows of bullets embedded in the walls and a dark stain running out the front door and sinking into the gravel between the thin grass like a river delta. The sergeant speaks to one of the guards. He lifts the tape and beckons. They enter the hut, careful not to step on the blood. Inside it is dark; the light bulb is broken, and shafts of light stream through the broken windows. The floor is covered with shattered glass and the furniture is riddled with bullet holes. In the centre of the living room is a pool of drying blood studded with pieces of body. He cannot tell whether these are bone or brain or flesh. On the tiled floor the blood has run everywhere in rivulets, is stamped all over the house in boot-prints. The smell is sour, like an abattoir.

'There were fifteen bodies found here,' says the sergeant, in a deep Xhosa accent. 'They must have rounded them up from all over the kraal and killed them here. The three children were found in the wardrobe, they were dead.' David fumbles, stammers, his coolness turned to gaucherie. 'Um, um.' He reaches into his bag, struggles with the zip. 'May I take some photos?' he asks absently.

'No – only official police photographers are allowed to take photos here. We are still busy with our own investigation.'

'I see.' He knows there is no official police photographer.

'If you take any photographs you will have to pay a fine.'

'How much is the fine?'

'Two hundred rand.'

The sergeant and his escort leave the room. David wanders through the house, snapping photographs: the living-room floor, the shattered front door, the open closet, the bullet-holes in the walls, doors, chairs, tables, television, the pencil-thin shafts of sunlight shining through the holes in the ceiling. In the bedroom he notices an empty shell on the floor and slips it into his pocket. When he emerges from the house he pays the sergeant two hundred rand in a handshake. The sergeant leads him back to the gate, head bowed, huffing in the heat.

‘Terrible, this shootings. This tsotsis,’ says the officer.

‘Yes, terrible. Do you have any idea who might have done this?’

‘Well, we have no leads right now. I don’t know who would have done such a thing. Why would anyone slaughter a whole family like that? Our police station is so overworked we will hardly have time to do a proper investigation anyway. We already have problems with the docket – it went missing from the office. I have an officer working on a new docket, but there are so many administrative problems with that. We have to explain the disappearance of the first docket, which requires an audited investigation to be sent to the committee and ratified, before we can open a second docket. We are still working on the disappearance of the docket, and the committee only sits next month. Things will have to wait till then.’

‘I see.’

The sergeant glances at David and puffs deeply, sending his chins into unhappy bounces.

David continues: 'Is there any remaining family that I can speak to about the murder? Any family friends? As a lawyer I'd like to gain some personal perspective – it may help in my investigation.'

The sergeant continues to stare at his feet as he walks. 'Haai, haai, haai. Yes, every family has friends. But I don't know who they are. I am not the right person to ask.'

They reach the gate and the guards surround him. The sergeant shakes David's hand; it is clearly time for him to leave.

'Sala kakuhle.'

'Hamba kakuhle.'

David makes his way back down the hill, patting his shoulder bag, the other hand stuck in his pocket, rolling his fingers around the discarded shell.

A troop of children circle David's car at a safe distance. He must walk through them to reach it; they watch every move, giggling. They shout: umlungu! umlungu! and laugh loudly. He can't focus – what does one do after visiting a murder scene? Take a nap? Have a cup of coffee? Get back to the office and start a report?

He returns to the Fort Campbell Hotel. The windows in the lobby are shuttered and the room is cool and dark. He begins a conversation with the young receptionist, Thandi. He does not speak of himself, but is inquisitive about her: she grew up in Fort Campbell, matriculated in Umtata. Her uncle owns the hotel.

'Have you heard of the recent murders?'

'Haai haai haai. Yes. Of course.'

'Tragic. I hope no-one you know was involved.'

'No. I am not from that family.'

‘Well, that’s fortunate. That poor family. Any idea who they were?’

She glances around the room.

‘Why do you ask such questions?’

‘Just curious. I come into town on business, and next thing there’s a murder just around the corner. It’s all quite exciting!’

‘What business are you in?’ She purses her full lips, questioning.

‘I’m buying sheep. I’ve just bought a smallholding near Coghlan.’

She beckons to him to lean forward and whispers into his ear: ‘I don’t think you are a businessman. But I’m sure you have your business. Why don’t you try the records-house in Bisho? That’s where they keep the... official information.’ She smells of coconut oil. He whispers back: ‘Thanks.’

They continue to talk, about Cape Town, the weather, corruption in the Eastern Cape, the strange lights that have been appearing over the Free State.

A man enters the room; bright light floods through the open door. Thandi snaps back.

‘Thanks for your help.’

‘You are welcome.’

He returns to his room. He’s tired and unintentionally drifts into sleep through the grind-*klink* of the ceiling fan and the haze of the pink-washed walls and the deep afternoon heat and is soon dreaming of Angeline running through the palm-grove at the top of the Port Elizabeth garden. Her long hair covers her back and she wears nothing but a necklace of cowrie shells around her neck, white against her mulatto-brown skin. He can never quite reach her; she always slips behind a palm-frond or disappears into the undergrowth and all is

suddenly silent but for the swishing and hissing leaves. It always takes so long to find her.

She is as silent as a ghost.

University of Cape Town

## Chapter 2--CAPE TOWN

Even before his arrival in Fort Campbell and his visits to the police-station and the murder site, David had already had a long day. That morning had started with a clear picture: they went to the beach, and it was beautiful. The family picnic, lying down on the grass before the varicoloured beach houses that lined the shore of St James like so many toy building-blocks. The children ran on the grass and balanced on the outer wall of the tidal pool, laughing at the splash and the spray, sometimes being knocked down by the bigger waves. The sun sparkled on the crisp waters.

He remembers the sensation of running down towards the sea, streams of cousins and nephews and friends and hangers-on fanning out like a flock of freed birds, piping in their high tongues childish nonsense words. The sky seemed higher then, the mountains wilder, the tentacles of the anenome more tantalising, mysterious.

Then a light filled the sky, and from that light descended a metal craft, sleek and metallic and suspended above the ocean, the size of a flattened mountain. And from that craft came a sensation of utter repose, that all artifice was meaningless before it, that indeed in that metal disc lay beings from another dimension, another planet, another time, who were studying, studying, the way his cousin Reyno studies elephants and crocodiles in the Addo

Elephant National park. To the frog, the stork, the mongoose and the preying mantis, the game-wardens are gods, with their bright lights, helicopters, dart-guns. Thus was the disc, suspended above the glistening waters of False Bay.

There the dream or memory ended. David woke not knowing which it was, something he had never known, even after waking up like this a hundred or a thousand times before. He looked around: he had once again passed out in a deck chair on Sven's roof, still wearing his suit, still clasping a half-full bottle of Tafel Lager. The sun was rising behind Signal Hill, but Bantry Bay was still hidden in a pre-dawn glow; orange-grey mist shrouded the sea and all was silent but the rippling water. Cape Town was sleeping.

Georgina had passed out on a deck-chair mattress on the floor beside him, still wearing a sky-blue bikini over her pale, almost translucent skin. Her short blonde curls had fallen forwards, obscuring her cherubic face. She was entwined with the naked figure of Nadia, a Ukrainian model (six-two, brunette, 34DD) that Sven had brought back from Milan. Rather pose on the beaches of Cape Town than clamour for attention in the frozen back-streets of Europe, at least for the season. Of no use to Sven though – she was there only for aesthetic purposes. It was expected that a few models would be drifting around Sven's house at any given time, in the same way that large tasteless sculptures were expected to adorn his rock-garden and a heap of white powder was expected to appear when he revealed the inside of his safe to whoever was his closest friend at the time.

David's phone started ringing. He was slowly becoming aware of his splitting headache and was soon thoroughly regretting everything, but nothing in particular. He answered the phone. It was Simon, telling him to come to the office immediately.

Immediately. There was no urgency in his voice, just a matter-of-fact tone which made David nervous through his veil of half-sleep.

‘Fine. Gimme fifteen.’

‘Good. Have a shower. You had better be awake by the time you get here.’

He stripped off his suit and jumped into the pool. Always a good hangover cure: the cold water washed off the smoke, the sweat, the traces of coke, the smells of spilt beer and cigarette ash. He paddled to the edge of the water, splashing about. The view, once the water had restored his senses, was spectacular. The pool spilled over the edge of the deck, which looked over the mountain bowl plunging into the waters of Bantry Bay. The deck extended to either side, hanging over the boulders and icy water below. His splashing sent ripples disappearing over the edge. A lone seagull sailed through the glow, croaking solemnly. The cold water and cool beauty refreshed and replenished, washing away his tiredness and fragile mood, leaving only a vague feeling of resignation at being at the beck and call of Simon the sadistic manager – what was he up to at this hour in the morning?

‘Five fucking thirty,’ he cursed to himself. He towelled down and changed into one of Sven’s suits (they are approximately the same size and Sven, having locked himself into his suite with the three boys from Bellville that he picked up God-knows-where, probably wouldn’t even notice the theft). He tucked some of Georgina’s curls behind an ear, kissed her on the cheek to wake her up, and whispered – ‘Baby, I’ve got to go. Had a call from work.’

Georgina had passed out with her contact lenses in and her eyes were glued shut. Only one eye opened; her usually sparkling turquoise iris was now set against a bloodshot mess. ‘Ja, like, whatever. Bye.’ The eye closed again. OK. Georgina was amazing: even

after a night of heavy abuse she still managed to seem freshly cut from the pages of a fashion magazine (with the exception of her storm-tossed eye). David gave her one last kiss on the lips, inhaling her natural scent of flowers and saccharine. It was like her: artificial, sweet, dangerous in large quantities. Yet with her eyes closed and her chest slowly rising and falling, all her faults seemed to melt away; he forgot the mania, the harsh contempt for anything mediocre (David sometimes found mediocrity relaxing), the constant flirtation, the inquisition he always had to face about Angeline, her uncanny skill in rooting out the truth from the tangle of lies he presented to her.

He stormed down the empty Somerset Road on his scooter, the office-towers of Cape Town ahead of him rising like dominoes from the morning mist. By six he was in Simon's corner office on the twentieth floor of the Safmarine building, where GES (Gerber, Engelbreght & Smith) had their offices. David settled into an arm-chair and waited for an explanation for his rude awakening, gazing absently through the sheet-glass window overlooking the city bowl and Table Bay, while Simon and Bradley discussed Simon's new car.

By six-fifteen they were all there – Simon, Charne, Bradley, Thando, Rana. Thando tossed a copy of the morning paper onto David's lap. The headline: *Massacre in Thembekaland*. While they continued discussing the merits of the T-spark versus the Kompressor, David read the article. The murder at four a.m. had just made it into the morning press, but the information was there: the gunmen emerging from the darkness and surrounding the compound, driving the family into the chief's house with their gunfire; the executions in the living room; the blood on the floor collecting in pools and flowing through

the open door like a river delta. Why, thought David, are they interested in this? They were a corporate firm: contracts, mergers, auditing, tax claims. Not criminal cases.

Simon ushered them into the board-room and began a long-winded speech which David suspected was skirting the point: the firm had done well working for the media and tourism conglomerates in Cape Town but it was time, he said, to expand both culturally and geographically; the future lies in the emerging economy, new money and old money, old context and new context, old rules and new rules. Zuraida brought them some coffee. Simon's tone dropped after she left the room. He had heard through the grape-vine that Thembekaland had been marked for development. Development that would use tribal land, which was administered by the chief, hence by the chief's lawyers.

Shafts of light from the early sun slanted onto the yellow-wood table. 'But now the chief is dead. Now no-one is sure who the heir is. If we can find him before any other firms sign him up...'

Whispers broke out, Bradley and Charne had their heads bowed together, Thando said something into Simon's shoulder.

Simon cleared his throat and continued: 'We need someone to look for this person. Go up to the Transkei (the Eastern Cape, interrupted Charne) and find this person, whoever he is, and sign him up. Now, our attorneys are too busy to go off on such short notice, so we want one of our clerks to go, which means David or Rana. David, your father has asked me to send you, but I leave the option open...'

David looked over at Rana (his tall, half-Jewish, gym-obsessed colleague and long-time drinking buddy), who was shrugging his shoulders.

'But the first choice is still yours.'

David's hands played shadows against the finely-grained wood. He looked up at Simon's long thin nose and receding grey-blond hair, his pinched Nordic features. The great tension that usually resided in his face had pulled it into patches of stretched, creaseless skin divided by deep grooves of worry, which bordered his clear, almost colourless eyes like moats.

'Whoever goes will need a car, hotel reservations, petrol allowance...' suggested David, keeping his eyes locked with Simon's.

'You'll get an expense account which we will top up as needed. We'll rent you a car and give you a petrol card. Zuraida will take care of your reservations. She's booked a room at the Fort Campbell hotel already.'

'Is the client worth all this money?' asks Rana.

'I've heard this is large-scale development. The World Bank might be involved. As the firm representing the chief, we could make millions. The chances are that the chief of the area will demand compensation and the developers will resist, and court-cases will drag on for months, maybe years. This client is strategically important: we need to branch out, diversify. With such an entrenchment in the Eastern Cape we could see massive growth in the future.'

The group sits in silence. Black swifts flutter onto the window-sill outside.

'Development, David.'

He was finally sobering up.

He conferred with Rana, who seemed to have too much to do in Cape Town, and didn't seem eager to charge off into the bush at such short notice. David's hangover tended

to agree with these sentiments, but the lure of an expense account could not be resisted.

Besides, anything that would mollify his father's bitterness was valuable in itself.

'I'll go,' he said, and the meeting broke up. Simon shook his hand and wished him luck.

'Remember,' he said, 'if we land this it might become the biggest account the firm has ever had. It would guarantee you a place here. It would be your account, a fast-track to partnership.' Simon held David's gaze, his eyes blanching, the blueish-grey so pale it seemed almost second-hand, until he turned abruptly and left for his next meeting.

Zuraida returned with a file containing a company credit card, his hotel reservations, maps and newspaper clippings from the national papers. She handed it to David with a wink of an eye-lined, mascara-pasted, eyebrow-plucked orb, and whirled out the room, leaving behind her the scent of damask, of cut rose-petals, of juniper berry.

After the meeting he collected his rented car from the downtown Avis. They had given him a three-series – clearly they wanted to make a strong impression. While adjusting the driver's seat he found, on the floor beneath the seat, a book the previous driver must have left behind, entitled *Man and Space* from the *Life Science Library*. He paged through; he had always had a fascination with space travel: the weightlessness, the other-worldly equipment, the ability to withstand the hammer of the sun and the ice of its shadow, the ability to survive without air. *Man and Space* was illustrated with old-fashioned drawings and photographs. David muttered grimly, absently to himself as he paged through the book: it was published in 1969, a year when the world was still doe-eyed about its fate in the universe, the year of the triumph of science over the limits of nature.

The author of *Man and Space* was Arthur C Clarke, David's childhood literary hero. He loved Clarke's faith in humanity: his faith in technological advancement, his faith that humans were citizens of the universe, his faith in the blank mysticism of the monoliths. David whispered as he turned the pages: Clarke never foresaw a global monoculture manipulated by a silent cabal, progress constantly restrained by greed. Humans had reached their zenith in 1969 and since then all energy has been focussed inwards, a magnifying glass, a mirror, an ingrown hair. *Clarke's science fiction remains exactly that*, he thought, *fiction*.

He stuck the book back under the chair and drove through the empty early-morning streets, the party-people emerging blinking and bewildered from Long Street's clubs, music still thumping from the windows.

At his Tamboerskloof apartment he packed some essentials and changed into his own, more comfortable, clothes. Giving in to an old habit, he took a last look around the apartment before he left: yes, all was in order. The maid, Beauty, had done an excellent job, every surface was scrubbed, every piece of loose junk put back in its place. He was proud of his apartment. The view over the city, the harbour and the mountain bowl was inspirational, his basic pieces of furniture made him happy with their simplicity. He shut the door with a *click*. He would be back soon enough.

Driving out of Cape Town was a pleasure: packed inbound traffic was hardly moving but in the open lanes leaving town he could speed freely, enjoying the hi-tech whine of the new machine. As he sped across the Cape Flats he watched the mountain in his mirror as it receded to the horizon. He soon disappeared over the top of Sir Lowry's pass, leaving the peninsula behind, and descended into the Hottentots Holland mountains.

Out of habit he freewheeled down the long descent, relieved that Table Mountain and Cape Town were out of view. He did not know why. Perhaps he no longer felt the eyes of the Capetonians boring into his back – Georgina, Angeline, Simon, his desk, the crew (Mike, Gus, Aitch, Rana), his parents, his apartment, his *stuff*. He started humming tunes, ‘*On the road again...*’. The road wound through fynbos-covered mountains and pine plantations. When he stopped to pee beside the road the silence was vast, nothing but the whisper of air through protea-bushes, the wings of insects. The smell, before that of his territory-marking overpowered it, was one of flowers, honey, dust, sweet-wood.

The hills subsided and new mountains rose to the left, the Langeberge that separate the coastal plains from the dry Klein Karoo. The ragged mountains on his left slid abruptly into an undulating sea of wheat-fields, dotted with the neat farmsteads of the Overberg Afrikaners. David’s eyes swept over the wide landscape, rested suspiciously on the boere in Hilux bakkies, the *tannies* driving from empty farm-house to empty village life. They who stayed behind when the great trek departed, content with their wealth and their civilized standards and their worldly education. Nonetheless they put up scant resistance when their poorer brothers erected a trailer-trash republic. After all, he thought, despite geographical appearances, the Cape is really an island, is it not? Separated from the continent by five-hundred miles of desert, the Cape is not really part of Africa (the black inhabitants are the newest arrivals here) or Europe (despite the delusions in the leafy vales of Bishopscourt and Constantia), and the Khoi-Khoi are scattered and mixed. The Cape is an island and its only true language is Creole, like the warped French of the beautiful Seychelles natives or the Caribbean twang of Jamaica.

He hummed along. There was not much traffic on a Tuesday morning. He stopped for petrol at Riviersonderend, the Endless River, and bought a packet of cigarettes (This was unusual for him - usually his smoking is part-time or second-hand. In fact this is one of his favourite pick-up lines: asking a pretty girl to breathe cigarette smoke into his open mouth.) Brunch was a Steers burger and a Coke. There was air-conditioning in the Steers, which was pleasant since the air outside was already shimmering with heat. He wondered how the petrol-attendants survived in their full over-alls, caps, boots, and socks. He was glad that he had air-conditioning in the car.

Back on the road he wound down his window to smoke his first cigarette. The hot air blew his hair around his face, blew out the flame of his lighter. But once lit, it was worth it. The air sucked up his sweat before he could even feel it, the cigarette desiccated before it was burnt, the smoke was the same temperature as the air. He slipped in a CD, 'The Very Best of Cream'. 'Crossroads' blasted into the heat, Eric Clapton straining his grainy guitar. He accelerated. This trip might not be such a bad thing after all.

He thought of Georgina. She did not seem perplexed that he was disappearing into the hinterland to a green hill where at four a.m., while the three of them were tangled on the thick carpet of Sven's living room, blood flowed out of a clay door and into the gravel, sinking between the blades of grass. Would he be perplexed if the tables were turned?

After Swellendam the road turned away from the Langeberge and headed towards the coast. With the mountains disappearing over the Northern horizon and the road running straight over the long, flat coastal plain, he accelerated towards Mossel Bay, pushing the Beemer until other cars seemed like stationary obstacles to be swerved around, singing along to *Soul Rebel*, feigning a Jamaican accent.

Long before he saw the town, he saw the towers, chimneys, containers and pipelines of that infamous white elephant, Mosgas. Set apart from the town and surrounded by miles of empty scrubland, the refinery looked like a moon-base or the lair of a crazy Bond villain. He stopped beside the boundary to look and climbed out of the car. The sea-wind whispered over the grass and through the electrified fence. Over this the hum of current. Hmm – there’s some real rain-making: the American firms that helped construct this *thing*, not thinking about the fact that ‘district courts shall have original jurisdiction of any civil action for a tort only, committed in violation of the law of nations or a treaty of the United States’. Indeed: a crime against humanity, a violation of the law of nations, helping the handful of whites in South Africa cling onto power with their teeth, their guns, their coal-to-petrol fuel. Which is why they are doing the congressional shuffle to have the law repealed: the laws of other nations must now be entirely subservient. Would there be a parliamentary shuffle here? He got back into his car, slammed the door.

The highway doubled-up and skirted both Mossel Bay and George. On the left the green shower-soaked Outeniqua mountains rose from the forest, nature-reserved and tourist-trodden. Once a last haven for hunted San and elephants, now all extinct. David slipped into day-dreams and the ‘Garden-Route’ hamlets rolled by: Knysna, Plettenberg Bay, Wilderness. By early afternoon he arrived at East London, the last town of any size before the N2 enters the old Transkei, which until a decade ago had been reserved for ‘natives’ and their cattle, their tribal wars, their sangomas and fireside stories. This land was not yet ready for lawyers and their schemes, low-slung cars and their slicked-back occupants.

Despite all this, David was surprised at the quality of the road to Umtata: the legendary pot-holes, falling rocks and stone-throwing children were gone, although the path

was often blocked by herds of cattle or immobile donkeys. Nonetheless signs of modernity faded until he was surrounded by empty brown hills, dotted with aloes and webbed by brown goat-paths.

He descended into the deep valley of the Kei River, the old border between rival Xhosa tribes, later the border between white and black. Dry afternoon heat gathered in the depression. At the bottom of the valley he stopped at the oasis of the Kei River Engen. The brightly-coloured petrol station, fully equipped with an air-conditioned shop and restaurant, was a lone bubble of coolness under the heat of the valley. David paced up and down the parking lot, pumping blood through his legs, savouring the vastness of the valley under its shimmering lid of heat, before entering the cool shop and buying a Coke. Back in his car he was soon blasting Creedence and growling in second gear behind a huge sheep-truck going forty up the seemingly endless hill that wound up into the Transkei.

Near Gcuwa (the *Butterworth* sign had been replaced), he saw, alone in an empty field, surrounded by cows munching on flowering grasses, a sign advertising a sister institution of Fort Hare, the Eastern Cape Technikon. It said: *Eastern Cape Technikon: Progress through Technology*. He knew that Angeline was a photography student there; strange to put a place to the name. A few kilometres further he passed a scattering of face-brick buildings surrounded by more fields. Progress Through Technology? So these humble buildings were where the fiasco on the beach had its distant origins.

Angeline's childhood addiction to his mother's discarded *Elle* and *Cosmopolitan* magazines had led to the theft of Simon's camera and a subsequent flurry of clicking and posing. David was recruited as her photographic assistant. At first he would accompany her on walks through the jungle to take photographs of fallen chicks or tail-less lizards. Soon,

though, she wanted to imitate the women from her favourite mags. At that tender age when hormones were first being squeezed into his blood stream they would spend long afternoons after school taking turns to pose for the camera (before the parents returned from work, his father pacing up and down the creaking wooden passageways or sitting on the stoep, looking out over the garden, cradling a whiskey, his mother rocking on her old wicker chair, watching *The Bold and the Beautiful*). In his room, beside a pile of Angeline's clothes, David would catch a whiff of her early adolescent scents as she flicked a candy-striped miniskirt over her pink underwear, or find his innards pulled by the tug of her young breasts against a hastily changed sweater.

Angeline's first aesthetic love was the fall of clothing over a line of body, but once she emerged from the protection of the house her camera-gaze shifted to the harsh world beyond their garden-empire. Ten years later she won an amateur award for a series of photographs capturing the tenderness between a mother and child, contrasted with the stark despair of their surroundings: a rusty shack, a gutter, a feeding-queue. This uncanny ability to capture a monochrome image (along with, by 1995, her melanin-count) won her a scholarship to study photography at P.E. Tech and thence, by a long and torturous route, to that sweat-drenched, delirious, decidedly olfactory afternoon on Oudekraal beach.

After a few hours David reached the turn-off to Fort Campbell, denoted by a rusty sign leaning at an angle away from the road – R667 Fort Campbell. The dirt road descended into a long valley that headed inland, overshadowed by the occasional acacia tree and scattered with cow droppings. It slowly degenerated into a rough two-track path; the grass sprouting from the middle scratched against his chassis. By mid-afternoon he had rocked and bounced

and scraped his way to Fort Campbell, which was perched on a hilltop like most Transkei settlements. There the dirt-road terminated. Beyond this point there were only cattle-tracks.

The village was no more than a handful of trading stores, PEP clothing, a police station and shop fronts with Xhosa slogans he did not understand. *Kwa Siyalinga Engqushwa*. What does that mean? But the village looked more prosperous than he had imagined. Amongst the old bakkies were many new twin-cabs, Hyundais and BMWs. Fashion was everywhere. The flowing skirts of the women competed for colour. Many of the men wore sharp suits, tasselled leather shoes and waistcoats. Heat, he thought, must have no effect on them. David noticed the young women bursting from lycra tops, wobbling on platforms, creaking in their jeans. They carried their faces high into the sun. *They are on their way up*, he thought, *comfortable in their seats, the winds of change are behind them*.

On one corner a group of women were selling watermelons. They sat on crates beneath a pink umbrella. Oddly, their backs were turned to the watermelons. *Why? What do they see that he does not? No one is buying watermelons. How do they make money?* On another corner a skinny man was selling second-hand clothes from a pile on the naked pavement. Behind him was a store whose entire front – except for a small placard advertising MTN – was an advertisement for *Inkomazi*, which was advertised as *Rich and Creamy*. Sour milk and air-time: rural commodities.

But before him, unmistakably, was the Fort Campbell Hotel, the only double-storey building in the village, flamingo-pink. The first floor sported a columned balcony on all four sides; the same columns covered a deep stoep below. Above the entrance was a gable of indeterminate style on which was hand-painted *Fort Campbell Hotel* and a placard advertising *Oude Meester*. It is imagined that hotel-dwellers drink brandy. A collection of

*indodas* were hiding in the shade of the stoep, some leaning against the wall, smoking cigarettes, others on their haunches, watching him with eyes both vacant and threatening. So you, you are a hotel-dweller? Give me some *Oude Meester*, my old master.

There was a parking space between a Venture and a low-slung bakkie. He slipped in and eyes followed him to the entrance. He had rarely felt so white. The receptionist, an eloquent and fine-featured young woman, showed him to his room. On the first floor he had his own piece of balcony with a view over Fort Campbell and the green hills beyond. He dumped his bags and took a shower. He must be refreshed before visiting the captain and the site of the murders.

University of Cape Town

## Chapter 3--BISHO

David sleeps fitfully and wakes before dawn. From his window he can see a pale glow to the east. The birds are calling in the dark bushes, glad for the new day. He showers and shaves in his little en-suite bathroom. His reflection in the shaving mirror has the familiar large green eyes, with their streaks of grey and blue, staring back at him. Strange: his eyes look mournful even when he is not. Even when he is happy, as those close to him have so often said, he looks wistful, doubtful of how long his luck will last. He checks for wrinkles, but to his relief finds none. The people at Environ had done a good job with his facial (a secret he has revealed to no-one): a month ago he had woken up on the floor of his apartment to find a wrinkle beside his eye. Georgina had said it was from all the drinking and smoking, which had filled his body with free radicals. He had replied that she was a free radical, and that he would fill her body with himself.

It is already warm and he changes into fresh summer clothes and sips a mug of instant coffee on the balcony. The darkness slowly lifts; mist has settled into the valleys but the air between the hilltops is as clear as glass. The sky slowly fills with colour, the clouds becoming wisps of amber and pink, the hilltops streaked with red, the valleys shadowed in green and grey. The crossroads below is empty except for a pair of boys driving a tired-

looking team of oxen out of the village and into the hills. The bird-calls subside and all is silent but the wings of swallows and the clop of ox-hooves. David's thoughts dwell on the murder site: the boot-prints, the wardrobe, the television, the holes in the ceiling. He holds the empty shell before an open eye, squinting at the crescent of sun through the hollow cartridge. *Where did this one go?*

To his disappointment Thandi is not at reception. He breakfasts on the hotel's stiff mielie-pap mixed with syrup and milk. There are already others in the dining-room, all black men wearing suits, some reading *The Herald*, some drinking coffee from steaming mugs. The front page again features the killing; beside the brief article is a photo of the house riddled with bullets, the door kicked open.

He departs after his meal and struggles back down the country road, passing the boys and their team of oxen. They break out in white smiles and wave at him, laughing at the umlungu in his silly car. He selects Mozart's 27<sup>th</sup> piano concerto; the notes float from his open window and into the valley. He enjoys the music: the violins are like a river to him, sometimes slow, sometimes tumbling and splashing; over this the piano rings out like struck glass, both playful and melancholic.

When he was a baby, his mother would rock him in the cradle, on the porch overlooking the long slope of their PE garden, the unkempt lawn, the banana trees, the acre of jungle sheltering the river at the bottom. The circle of young thorn-bushes beyond the stream. Ten years later, he and Angeline used to lie on the Persian rugs, looking at the ceiling. The sound of violins would fill the room. With great dramatic movements he would conduct the imaginary orchestra while Angeline played an invisible piano. Meanwhile, Patience - stoical, silent, dressed in her faded pink maid's dress - would dust the window-

sills, sending up clouds of particles to glow in the sunlight that streamed through the bay-windows of the living-room. His first summer holidays: not separated by school, he and Angeline had drifted through the long days together. With one hand on the steering wheel, David directs the orchestra, guiding the violins with his palm, dotting time with his fingers.

Bisho, the provincial capital of the Eastern Cape, was also previously the capital of the Ciskei, the 'Independent State' of the southern branch of the Xhosa people. The old bureaucratic headquarters were simply given different labels, the old bureaucrats given different titles. But now that the town's jurisdiction has expanded far beyond the tribal lands of the Ciskei, new buildings have been added to the ugly collection of modernist blocks, bigger cars have been added to the fleet of bureaucratic juggernauts. Between the government buildings are well-kempt parks of British pretension, dotted with duck-ponds and willow-trees; gravel paths meander through the clipped grass. However, unlike Regents Park, bergies sleep beneath the willows, stinking of urine and brandy and rotting teeth, armed with flick-knives.

The Public Records Building is an unexceptional cottage on the periphery of the bureaucratic quarter, fenced with bare wire and with a single acacia tree growing in front. There is no sign of human activity. The wire gate and front door swing open and he finds himself in a bare reception room with two aging chairs and an ancient ceiling fan that circles slowly like a tired crow, moving no air. The olive-coloured paint is cracked and flaking off the walls. In the next room, which is separated from the first by a bare wooden counter-top, sits an obese woman dressed in a floral-print dress, with the face and expression of an angry bullfrog. She is asleep. David coughs. She does not move, except for a dip of annoyance in

her features. He coughs again and she opens her eyes, but shows no sign of recognition. She glances towards one of the chairs, in which he obediently sits. She starts to read *The Sunday Times Magazine*, but the copy is two years old. David looks at her expectantly. She lifts one unhappy brow.

‘Molo buti.’

‘Molo mama.’

The woman is unmoved by his attempt to speak her language but returns his greeting and starts speaking in rapid Xhosa. Between breaths he manages to fit in the qualifier:

‘Ndisukuthetha isiXhosa.’

She stops mid-sentence. ‘Ufuna ntoni?’

‘I’m looking for genealogical information. I’m researching tribal systems here in the Transkei, so I want to look at family trees in the area. It has quite an interesting history.’

He has always excelled at lying.

‘Uvelaphi wena?’

‘I’m from the Centre for Family Studies in Cape Town. It’s a research project of ours.’

She gives him a sceptical glare. David shifts his weight around, waiting for a response.

‘Ngubani igama lakho?’

‘David Barendse’.

She stares blankly at him, perhaps hoping that he will go away. Eventually she heaves a great sigh and pulls an application form from under the counter.

‘Fill this in. You can come back tomorrow.’

‘But I won’t be here tomorrow. I need to see the records today. Are you full?’

‘No, but you must book the use of the public records room in advance. The soonest you can use it is tomorrow.’

She continues to stare, as if hoping this will finally make him leave. He is stuck: this does not look like the kind of woman that will accept a ‘fine’, but he does not want to spend an empty day in this miserable town.

‘That’s a great pity. It means that this area will be left out of our research. We are publishing a book about South African tribal families and their histories. All the most important families will be included, along with their customs and ceremonies, their most illustrious members and chiefs, photographs of their lands, and so on. The Ciskei and Transkei are so rich in culture. It would be a great pity to leave it out.’

‘A great pity. But I would be glad to help you with your research tomorrow.’

‘That won’t be possible. I have already booked a hotel room for tomorrow in Port St Johns, where I’ll be looking at the tribes of the northern Transkei. All the people that assist me there will of course be mentioned in the front of the book as important contributors to the documentation of South Africa’s cultural heritage.’ He hands back the application and begins to pack his papers into his briefcase.

She waits for him to reach the door.

‘Mr Barendse.’

He turns to face her.

‘I would be breaking the rules, but I could slip your application into yesterday’s folder – you might be able to use the room this afternoon. If that suits you.’

That does not suit him at all, but he smiles.

‘That’s fine. Thank you very much.’

‘Four ‘o clock then?’

‘Nkosi mama. Sala kakuhle.’

‘Hamba kakuhle, buti.’

He walks through the empty parks. He sticks on his headphones, listens to a trance tape from his outdoor-party days. The sounds of Bisho are blocked and his Getafix Mix throbs and thumps in his head. As with most African trance, the fine details around him seem to move with the music, the heavy steps of bureaucrats, the fine movements of willow leaves, the breathing of sleeping *bergies*, the breaking smiles of intombis. His foul come-down mood has temporarily lifted. Progress at last.

The park leads down to the commercial quarter, which has also benefited from the expansion of the town. The pavements are heaving with colourfully dressed people who overflow into the streets and shops. David is the only white person in the crowd. Signs of recently acquired wealth (or credit) are everywhere: the sharp suits of the men, the modish fashion of the women, the tiny phones, the enormous sedans and 4X4’s pushing through the traffic of old Toyotas and rusted bakkies. The furniture shops, clothing stores and CD-shops are full. All blast kwaito and afro-hip-hop direct from Jo’burg. Hawkers line the streets behind colourful stands selling anything: tomatoes, underwear, fridges. They shout their prices, which sound ridiculously cheap: ‘*bona, bona, two packets naartjies five-rand!*’ says a skinny man with a torn red shirt and gold-rimmed Ray-Bans. ‘*Bona, bona, ten rand, ten rand!*’ says a fat *mama* with a friendly smile and a squint eye, pointing at an inverted vegetable crate in which are trapped about twenty chickens. ‘*Ten rand Basie!*’ she shouts at David, seemingly convinced that he is here to buy a chicken.

He wanders down towards the taxi-rank, which occupies a whole street, where commuters are still flooding into the town. The taxis stand in neat rows while passengers climb on and off. Small stores line the taxi-rank: cellphone repairs, a linen centre, tailors, hardware stores, vegetable markets, cafés. People everywhere. The sun is already beating down and the crowd is too hectic and it's been thirty-six hours without a line. He continues down the street, which soon takes him out of the business hub of the town and into open plots of land between the scatterings of block-houses that pass as suburbs. Time for a cigarette.

What to do? He does not want to speak to any more bureaucrats. He has a feeling that all he will get there will be misinformation anyway. Until he has personally looked at the official records, there is little else he can do. If there are any surviving heirs he cannot look for them. If there aren't, he cannot begin soliciting the rival families.

Irritated again, he kicks at loose stones and littered soda cans. Why should he always swim upstream? Why should he always wait? Why should he always deal with fools? He picks up a stick and slashes at the weeds growing beside the road. He wouldn't have had this job if his father hadn't been friends with Simon – they were together on the border – and if David had pursued the career he wanted to: NGO work in a nice office-flat on Kloof Street or perhaps in De Waterkant. He wanted to work for Legal Aid, or work for low rates for any of the struggling children's shelters, environmental lobbies, battered women's groups, AA's, NA's, hospices, children's hospitals and SPCA's. This was not because he was benevolent, or above material desires. His family would, or at least should, take care of the latter, and he wants to escape the rat-race only out of self-interest. Corporate hoo-haa infesting his brain would blunt the edges of the pleasures he holds so dear - the organic, the subtle, the sublime – and place limits on the freedom of his mind, something he could never accept. He wants to

help the helpless because of Bacchus and Pan, not out of some innate munificence. Besides, it's a pick-up line that would wet the pants of all but the cruellest babes: 'I help street kids' or 'I work for a Cape Flats literacy project', and so on.

But his father would not allow it. He accused David of not appreciating the effort made to bequeath him the life that he had, how difficult it had been to rise up from nothing, from the poor white son of an alcoholic miner on the East Rand.

'How easy it is,' he would say, leaning back in his easy chair, studying David with his bruised boxer's eyes, 'to make money when you have money. Because you went to Bishops and did Law at UCT you start higher up on the ladder. Unless you can climb it, what are you worth? What has been the point of my work? What would you do without your education and your little luxuries like your clothes and your phone and money for drinking?'

David had argued that working for less money at an NGO would be a moral advancement.

'Moral advancement!' The broken blood-vessels in his face flared red with indignation. 'What do they know of moral advancement? The terrorist and the communist? Those who put the country's money into their own pockets? Take from the poor and give to yourself? *Rerig!*'

David could never convince his father that this was the exception rather than the rule, and that he could work to reduce such abuses.

'Hmph,' his father would say. 'What would you know? You've never been to the border.'

So his plan for a comfy low-work low-pay job in the service of humanity collapsed, and he had to take his articles at a corporate firm as the condition for his parents' maintaining

his first class-life in the face of his third-class intern's salary. Being stuck out here, he thinks, is the world's punishment for accepting this bargain.

He wanders through the suburbs, skirting the edges of the town centre, kicking at stones, until he is on the other side of Bisho. He heads back to the hotel; in the hotel lounge he drinks four beers in quick succession and falls asleep face-down on his bed.

The woman in the public records building has not moved. The fan has perhaps circled once. They greet each other and he follows her into a small room walled on three sides with shelves of files and on the other with a desk and computer. A door leads into the next room, this one larger and filled with rows of shelves that reach the ceiling, all packed with more files.

'We close at seven. Good luck.'

He has filled out no forms, he is not officially here. If he returns tomorrow his presence will be officially recorded, publicly notified.

'Nkosi kakhuhle mama.'

The computer can access the national archives network, as well as recent entries in the local area, but records pre-dating 1994 have not been computerised; instead they are bound in thick cases covered in green faux-leather, layered with dust and cobwebs. Births, deaths, marriages, baptisms, divorces, land tenure: all have been recorded in the flowing handwriting of various 'Homeland' administrators. Using the index-book he accumulates heaps of files on his desk, which are thankfully also indexed. In the information age this enterprise feels archaic, like using the slide-rule or the sextant. His progress is slow, but a picture begins to emerge from the heaps of unrelated facts, an old photograph in sepia emerging from

the chemicals of the dark-room, revealing for the first time the facts of the matter, a permanent record.

The chief: Sipiwo Thembeke, born in 1920 on tribal land in what was then the Union of South Africa. He married Nombuyiselo in 1942, who gave birth to five children, two daughters and three sons. David does not pursue the life-lines of the daughters, they are of no interest as rights descend through the male. Sipiwo's sons – Mbuyiselo, Mxolisi and Little Mandla – would have been the inheritors of the chieftaincy. After the death of a chief, inheritance passes to his sons, beginning with the eldest, then to his brothers, and finally to his brothers' sons. If, as in this case, the chief and his brothers are simultaneously killed – as might occur in a battle – his grandsons and nephews' sons, if they had reached manhood, would also be eligible. If there are no eligible relations then the family loses its claim to the chieftaincy. Traditionally, this would be resolved through an *indaba* – a meeting of the men of the tribe – who would be tasked with reaching consensus on who the new chief would be. But now that chiefs have been incorporated into the region's political system, this decision is made by a committee appointed by the ruling political party.

The afternoon sun slants into the room through the shutters, illuminating the dust from old books suspended in the humid air. David sweats even though he wears only a vest. He begins to map the chief's sons, grandsons, brothers, nephews. But every discovery of a new relation only leads to more avenues. Possibilities are multiplying rather than narrowing; no answers will be found today. He returns to the reception desk, where the woman is once again asleep. He coughs and she again opens one eye.

'Wena?'

He explains the state of his search; could he please come back tomorrow?

She inhales deeply and breathes a long, contemplative sigh.

‘We are now booked tomorrow.’

‘But...’

‘We are booked tomorrow.’

He stands, immobilised by her stubbornness. She gazes into empty space for some time, eventually turning to fix him with an uncomfortable stare. Seemingly having decided upon something, she gives one last sigh and rises from her seat in a series of gasps and huffs, her chins and rolls of fat bouncing from unaccustomed movement. She sways towards the research room.

‘Follow me.’

She stops at the door and flicks the Yale-lock back and forth.

‘If you really need to finish your research tonight, you can stay here after closing hours. But I will be gone and can take no responsibility for you. I’m just warning you: if the security people see you they will think you are a burglar and burst in and shoot you. Keep quiet and only use the desk-lamp. They drive past every hour.’

He thanks her profusely, but she only returns his thanks with disdain.

‘As long as you are gone by the time I arrive tomorrow.’

He nods his assent.

‘The door will lock when you leave.’

Back in the research room he continues to map Sipiwo’s family. Eventually, the birth-records are exhausted and he has drawn the family tree. As the sun sets, David pages through the lists of deaths, crossing lines through those that died in the house or by other means. One by one, the inheritors are scratched off the list; the picture becomes clearer.

Siphiwo's eldest son, Mbuyisile, died a few years ago. The record says pneumonia, but no-one dies of pneumonia these days: he died of AIDS. Mxolisi was killed in the house: David has seen the back of his stiff body in the third fridge. Little Mandla died in 1994, listed as 'vehicle accident'. With him were his two daughters Vuyiswa and Nikiwe, who also died. Mbuyisile's eldest son, Nkosinathi, was being groomed for chieftaincy: he had attended St Andrew's in Grahamstown and the University of Fort Hare. He now shares Mbuyiseli's fridge. Mbuyiseli's daughters emerge unscathed; their private education seems to have led to their seduction by city-slickers, one is now in Cape Town and the other in Johannesburg. Too busy to attend a funeral?

Mxolisi's daughter, Nomthendezo, is also absent. She was married to an evangelist in East London. Her brother, Khokhetso, lay in the fourth fridge, the back of his shirt soaked in deep red blood. Little Mandla had married a widow from the Ciskei called NoGovernment, who had borne him two daughters, Rebecca and Rachel. Breaking with tradition, their English names were placed before their Xhosa names, Nozuku and Xholiswa. Little Mandla seemed to have a penchant for biblical names: his only son, younger than the second daughter by ten years, is called Absalom Maseko Thembeka. No subsequent record of him though: no confirmation, no marriage, no property, no taxes paid. Bookmarked.

David is buried in heaps of files as the last red rays of light disappear and he continues his work under a small pool of lamp-light. Siphiwo's male descendents are either dead or missing; he moves on to Siphiwo's brothers. Big Mandla, the oldest brother, died in a 'vehicle accident' in 1994, which was when Siphiwo became chief. Big Mandla had two sons, Maseko and Wisdom. The elder son, Maseko, had six children, of which three were male, who again had biblical names: Moses, Joseph and Gideon. He even had a grandson

through Joseph: Computer was born in 1996. He hardly took up any space in the fridge that he now shared with his second-cousins. But this flame was now extinguished; Gideon was killed by 'gunshot wounds' in 2002. Joseph and Moses lay in the courtyard under black plastic bags. Wisdom was also listed as having died from 'acute respiratory disorder', probably another AIDS death. His only son, Thando, shared the black plastic bags with Moses and Joseph.

Monde was a late child and had also married late. His sons, Themba and Mbulelo, were born almost two decades after their cousins. Mbulelo died in 1999 of 'chronic bronchitis', and had no sons. Themba had married and his wife had given birth to Maverick and Mbulelo, named after their uncle. Themba was in the sixth fridge. Maverick and Mbulelo were side by side in death as they were in life.

Outside the traffic has died down and moonlight strikes the street and the acacia tree outside; the fence glares under the street-light. One by one the eligible heirs have been crossed off the family tree. Only one remains and even over this sits a large red question mark: Absalom, the youngest grandson of Sipiwo, eleventh in line for the chieftaincy, is neither alive nor dead; he is simply gone.

## Chapter 4—FORT HARE

David drives his new rental car down the N2. He has exchanged the BMW for a Landrover Freelander with a sun-roof. He had phoned Simon to explain that he could not reach the outlying areas in his BMW and that, in any case, the car made him feel out of place, that everybody was regarding him with suspicion.

‘I need to fit in more,’ he explained, ‘you know: drive a 4x4, wear stonewashed jeans and Cats, maybe grow a moustache.’

Simon laughed, an empty sound.

David didn’t mention that his next destination was just a tar-road away: the University of Fort Hare in the small town of Alice, just outside Bisho. Absalom had enrolled there as a Law undergraduate, but only ever completed one semester. It was the last time his existence was officially recorded.

David had also told Simon about Absalom. He was incredulous that only one heir to the chieftaincy remained.

‘But there were so many of them!’ he said. ‘They breed like rabbits up there!’

‘Well, apparently they are dying just as quickly.’

‘Apparently.’

Simon instructed David to 'keep a low profile'. Other people might be on the same track.

'A low profile? Like what?'

'Just don't throw your name around unless you need to. Also, keep your eyes open, be on the lookout for stuff. I think there's quite a lot of money riding on this.'

'For sure.'

'For sure.'

Driving along the winding Transkei road lifts David's spirits: the wind is pleasantly cool under the hot sun and the open sky above him makes him feel more the wanderer, less the prisoner. The landscape around him is vast, wild, brazenly green. In a buoyant mood, he decides to phone Georgina.

'Hey Baby.'

'Hi sweetie, how's it going?'

'OK. I'm still in the Transkei. Looks like I might be here for a while, I'm looking for a client that's gone AWOL.'

'Oh. Cool. How's it there?'

'Cool. It's beautiful really.'

Their first holiday on the Wild Coast: he remembers their hike along the rugged cliffs, how beautiful she had looked with her hiking-boots and back-pack on, a light flush on her usually pale cheeks, a rivulet of sweat running from under her blonde curls and down her jaw. He has a photograph of her on the edge of a cliff, in a typically coquettish pose, her backpack by her side, one hand on her hip and the other pointing East over the Indian ocean as if it were all hers, the same way she pointed at him.

'I remember,' she says. 'Lucky you.'

'How's Cape Town?'

'Same same. I've got a shoot today. This afternoon on Llandudno. Darren's shooting me.'

'Cool. Who's it for?'

'Don't know. I think it's some German magazine. The guy that's organising it is called Hans. He's pretty whack.'

'Just look after yourself.'

'You know I will.'

Silence.

'I miss you, you know,' he says.

'I miss you too.'

Her phone clicks off. Suddenly he really does miss her. A bleak Thursday afternoon at the Waterfront, with lonely seagulls cawing at the tourists dressed in safari gear buying bad African art in the giant shopping mall, could be turned by Georgina into a frenzied orgiastic free-for-all with a simple handful of mushrooms and a wink. David wonders: how had it come to this? How had he got himself into such an impasse? The smoke from his cigarette is sucked through the sun-roof and trails into the open air.

He tries to trace back the chain of events that spelled the end of his contentment, but he can find no source. The chain seems to go back all his life. But, he imagines, the immediate beginning was the appearance of Angeline in Cape Town. David was on Clifton Fourth Beach - he loved that strip of white sand between the plunging mountains and the Atlantic, the umbrellas and the ice-cream vendors. He was watching the models sun

themselves into a sweat, then get nipple-stands from the icy water. He had just smoked a joint of Swaziland's finest export and had lost his shoes, as well as his bankie, even though he hadn't moved since he had arrived on the beach. He was combing through the sand, chuckling at his own paranoia, when he saw her walking through the umbrellas, sweat glistening on her neck and her chest. She had filled out since he had last seen her, thirteen years before, when she was a skinny girl with a bounce in her walk and a wild crown of hair. Now she looked like an R&B diva: tall, regal, her skin the colour of milky tea, her floral bikini doing more to accentuate her form than to hide it. His headphones were blasting Creedence Platinum II and as he saw her 'Pagan Baby' started playing. He burst into laughter and she saw him across the beach and broke into a smile. David felt like the light of God had broken onto him like a sunrise or a ray of tropical sun through the eye of a hurricane. He smiled back. *Pagan Baby, won't you walk with me!* All thoughts of Georgina (he had been imagining her doing her own sweating, her own nipple-standing) fled from his mind, leaving no trace. He was once again blinded.

'Hi,' she said when she reached him, so simply.

'Hi.' They didn't need to talk, his mournful eyes smiling, her strong jaw set in determination and her olive-green eyes filled with expectation. After so many years apart, Angeline's face was both intimately familiar and distant, strange, and David absorbed her beauty eagerly: her long black hair was now pulled back in a pony-tail (he remembered it wild and short, or pulled into two plaits), but she still she had the same straight, regal nose, flecked with tiny freckles, almond-shaped Xhosa eyes that had blended into her mostly white features to give an almost oriental appearance, the same wide, brownish-pink lips which

could, with only the slightest pout, change her expression from soft affection to merciless anger, and now they hovered dangerously between both.

They scanned each other's eyes, looking for thoughts from their long-ago childhood. They gazed their way through their games in the jungle garden, their rendezvous' between the thorn trees, the Wendy-House at the bottom of the garden, sweating between the pot-plants and the gardening tools. Seconds later both knew the other was thinking of their parting night, the coffee spilt on the antique rugs, the promises they had made, curled up in his bed, listening to his father warm up the engine of the old Citroen under the pelting autumn rain.

They leaned forward to kiss each other, their lips lingered a moment too long, the beads of sweat on her upper lip, that familiar smell like the sweet dust of the aloe-fields, intoxicating, bringing it all rushing back as if the years had never passed. The beginning, he suspects, of all his troubles.

He was to leave her for an unhappy two years in Benoni, after which they moved to Cape Town, where he attended Bishops, once the school of Cape Town's Anglophile gentry, who now reluctantly rubbed shoulders with the newly rich of all shades of skin colour. Angeline was to stay in P.E. and attend Graham's Hill High, the town's only coloured high school, a huge crumbling block of a building whose sole claim to distinction was that any kind of drug under the sun could be bought on its gravel playing-fields or under the ancient graffiti-carved acacia trees that stood beside the school gates.

They had no choice: life had thrown them together for thirteen years, then it suddenly pulled them apart. He had promised to love her (to the full extent of his embryonic, adolescent concept of love), but she knew that he wouldn't waste his life away pining for

what he could not have. She knew that other girls would flutter in and out of his affections. His promise had meant that she would remain behind this fluttering, these cameo appearances. She, after all, had promised him the same. Their hands locked as they lay curled up in his bed, as they always did when his parents were out, their limbs intertwined, their noses almost touching. There they had sworn that one day they would return to this state of grace and then they made love for the last time in that bed and didn't see each other again until that day on Clifton when they were both stoned and paranoid and shaken to the core by what they had seen. Now Angeline glanced secretively over her shoulder, where an overgrown man in a bulging Speedo was asleep under an umbrella. David understood: the boyfriend. He was nothing but trouble.

They had often pondered the circumstances that had brought them together. Angeline was the mixed-race daughter of the family's black house-maid, born almost two years before David. Naturally, rumours abounded that Michael, David's father, was also Angeline's father, but no-one took these rumours seriously. David's mother would never have allowed that, nor did Angeline share any features with Michael's heavily featured face and bear-like build. Rather, it was accepted that the family had taken them in through the goodness of their hearts and concern for their servant: it was far safer for Angeline and her mother to live on the property than in the township, where mixed-race children were treated with suspicion and violence. So there they stayed, Angeline and Patience (her real name was Nombuyiseli, but the family never knew that), in a crumbling brick out-house at the bottom of the garden, behind a thick wall of wild banana trees. There Angeline grew up feral and free, shielded from the prejudice of the streets. The two children had always attended different schools. David went to Grey Primary, a different world to home, a place where Angeline did not exist.

At Graham's Hill Primary School, Angeline found one of the few places where her mild skin-tone didn't count against her. But to both children school was a merely a side-show, a distraction from home where they built their own empire in the jungle, played out love stories of their own invention, gave each other pet names and tamed tortoises and iguanas and water-spiders. The garden might as well have been an island.

So their childhood secretly slid into adulthood, chasing each other around the jungle garden, tumbling into the undergrowth, wrestling amongst the ferns for supremacy in their secret empire. They were a fair match: Angeline was almost David's height and fought with demonic strength; David hovered between the fear of hurting a girl and the determination not to be beaten by one. These fights became more and more frequent until, one day, David's mother sat them down at her wicker-cane table and questioned them. Her little, slender body was by then already starting to bend from the weight of her marriage, which combined the archaic notion of wifely obedience with the modern expectation that women should enter the working world. Her face, still pretty in a sharp, birdlike way (David had inherited her finesse of face, but his father's eyes), was lined into a permanent look of defeat. With her surrendered eyes darting from David to Angeline and back, she told them that they were no longer children and had to know their roles as adults – no more cavorting in the bushes. They replied that they were simply playing in the stream that ran through the bottom of the garden; but she saw the stripes of mud down their backs and kept a keen eye on them from then on.

But she had no chance of keeping perfect surveillance in the farm-sized garden. The pair would meet under bowers of ginger-reeds or in a clearing enclosed by thorn-trees whose only entrance was reached by wading across the stream. There they learned of the dual-edged sword of secrecy which cuts the finest degrees of excitement and frustration and whose

point is exquisite. It was no coincidence that the family's removal from the mansion and its dilapidated jungle came only a few weeks after the gardener caught them in a patch of sugar cane with Angeline's school dress unbuttoned and flared to each side like angel's wings and David lost in her kiss.

Fort Hare is a scattering of face-brick buildings set in green veld and cattle pastures. David parks in an empty parking lot and finds his way to the Faculty of Law. At the height of summer the campus is deserted, its colonnades empty, its cafeterias closed. Enormous statues of Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and Robert Sobukwe – all once students here - line the boulevard leading up to the central hall. The sons of the small black elite that survived under apartheid attended Fort Hare, the only Black university in the country at the time. Some of these sons became liberators, others returned to the source of their wealth: co-operation with the whites.

At the Law Faculty office two young secretaries sit behind the counter, drinking tea and chattering in Xhosa. One is voluptuous, her breasts packed into a tight black blouse, and wearing large bi-focal glasses. The other is thin and elegant, in jeans and a white jacket. They ignore his presence.

'Hello?'

They continue to ignore him.

'Hello?'

He might as well not exist. Eventually the voluptuous one swivels her head in his direction and dips to see through her bi-focal lenses; a hint of perfume catches his nose. Her expression says: *who are you to disturb us? Just because you are a white male doesn't mean*

*you get priority here; just because you want me doesn't mean you'll have me; just because I want you doesn't mean I'll have you.* David senses that he should be delicate. He is particularly polite, asking about their health, complimenting them on their clothes, making small-talk about Fort Hare and its heritage, its role in the struggle. *I know I can't have you. I want you, but I can't have you. Yes, how times have changed.*

He leads their small talk to the topic of Absalom. The secretaries have warmed to him and circle the computer, entering codes and names. Enrolled in 1997, Absalom completed his first June exams, with distinctions in Jurisprudence, Macroeconomics, Contract Law and Philosophy. He enrolled for the second semester, but was never seen again - they assume he disappeared during that time. The family paid his fees in full.

'Is there anyone around who might have known him?'

They reply that most of the staff are on holiday, since it is the middle of summer. The only academic on campus that might remember him is Professor Sibaya, his lecturer in Jurisprudence. They phone the professor and direct David towards his office on the top floor of the Law building. A plaque on the door reads:

*Professor S.V.B. Sibaya*

*Faculty of Law*

Professor Sibaya is a middle-aged man with a well-clipped beard and handsome features – he reminds David of Sydney Poitier, although he wears a pair of spectacles which gives him a more distinguished appearance. His office is walled with bookshelves that heave with books and photocopies and ring-bound files. His desk is also piled with books and scraps of paper. The professor sits behind the desk, swinging gently in his executive chair. Behind him a window looks out over the cow-pastures that surround the university.

They greet and David sits on an armchair beside the desk.

‘Please excuse the mess,’ says the professor, ‘I was not expecting any visitors.’ His voice is carefully modulated and has the lyrical quality of one who has learned English at a mission school.

‘No problem. You should see my office – always looks like a storm has just hit it.’

‘So... how can I help you?’ says the Professor, peering at David over the top of his glasses.

‘I’m looking for an ex-student of yours. He would have been in one of your classes in 1997. I know it’s a long way back, but I don’t have many leads.’

David waits for a response but the professor continues his sceptical glaze.

‘Mmm?’

‘His name is Absalom Thembeka. I represent his family’s attorneys. He disappeared some years ago and we need to find him in connection with a legal matter. He’s not in any trouble. It’s a family question.’

‘Yes,’ says the professor, drawing out the word, ‘That is long ago. Give me a moment to think.’

He turns and gazes out the window at a herd of Frieslands chewing cud near the Vodacom tower that serves the University.

‘I never knew Absalom personally, but I knew who he was. It was difficult not to know the name Thembeka if you were an AmaXhosa and part of the struggle.’

He pauses and brings his fingertips together. A dreamy expression comes over his face.

‘Then perhaps you can help me. Absalom has been missing for several years, but no body has been found. I would like to believe he is still alive.’

‘Yes, yes. Alive.’ The professor scans David with his eyes and eases into a wry smile.

‘Mr Barendse,’ he continues, ‘you are a lawyer yourself, I presume?’

‘Yes. I’m doing my articles at the firm.’

‘Indeed.’ The professor pauses again and starts suddenly back to life. ‘So you should know that it is your job to connect previously unconnected events. Do you expect to find Absalom without knowing who his family was? Why his family was killed? Who might have killed them? Absalom’s relation to his family?’

‘So you have heard about the murders in Fort Campbell?’

‘Of course. It was big news.’

‘Yes. It was terrible – the whole family was killed. But Absalom might receive the estate. That’s why I’m looking for him.’

The professor nods slowly. ‘Yes, I agree: a tragedy. But this is my question: why were these people rounded up and shot? Do you think it’s a coincidence that a family is murdered and the same family has a missing child?’

‘No... well... I’m not a great believer in coincidence. Yes, these questions have occurred to me, but I was hoping to track Absalom down first. That’s the instruction I have from my firm. It’s up to my bosses to know about the bigger picture. But if you can tell me anything about the background that you think will help, of course I would be grateful.’

‘You don’t think that you are placing yourself in danger?’

‘I don’t know. I haven’t really thought about it. I suppose it’s possible.’

‘Indeed.’

The professor gazes out the window again, seemingly drifting off.

‘Look here,’ he says, turning back to David and pulling up his sleeve. A long s-shaped scar, a violent shade of purple, winds down his fore-arm.

‘When the security forces came to arrest me in ’76, Sipiwo’s sons were with them. They were there when the sergeant dragged a knife down the bone. The x-rays still show the mark on the bone itself.’

He flexes his arm and the ‘s’ squirms like a snake.

‘I’m lucky I can still use my hand.’

‘I’m sorry.’

The professor leans back in chair. His eyes scan the ceiling, scan his memories, his face solid and still.

‘In the seventies,’ he says, his eyes suddenly fixing on David like two dark peepholes into another room, ‘before the Transkei was independent, when it was still a homeland, we used to have “study groups”. These were really political meetings. We would read socialist texts, like the *Communist Manifesto*, and study the history of other African revolutions. But eventually our group was infiltrated by an *impimpi*, an informer – I still don’t know who. We were at my house in Umtata one evening – it was in May 1976, just before the student protests. All of a sudden the homeland police burst in and arrested us all.’

His eyes glare at David, who feels like he is being accused even though he was not even born at the time. The professor pulls down his sleeve.

‘They wanted to know where the other comrades in the Transkei were but we didn’t know. We had as little information as possible in those days for exactly that reason, so we

could prevent a forced betrayal. After the three days and nights of interrogation we were thrown into detention. I spent eighteen months in solitary confinement.'

'Solitary?'

Professor Sibaya sighs at David's ignorance.

'Yes, solitary. Eighteen months in a cell three metres by two metres, with nothing but a mat and a toilet to keep me company.' His gaze rests on David again, making him squirm in his seat. *Why, he thinks, must I hear this? Why must he tell this?*

'We spent six months in detention without a trial. The trial lasted another year. Things improved then – sometimes we were allowed newspapers, which were like gold to us. Although the wardens were not allowed to, they sometimes let us exercise in the yard at the same time, especially when it was clear that someone was going to prison. That was how I found out about the Soweto riots – six months after they happened. The judge found me guilty under the Suppression of Communism Act. After my year and a half in detention I spent another five years in Umtata prison. They kept us in the death cells, even though we were not sentenced to death. But we were dead to the world.'

The professor carefully removes his glasses and polishes them with his tie.

Sibaya again catches David's eye, which is starting to wander.

'I am coming to the point now, I can see you are impatient. In '76, when the Transkei was being transformed from a homeland into a self-governing state, the government were doing a 'mopping-up' operations before handing over the state to Matanzima – detentions without trial, disappearances, assassinations. There were some protests at first, but the Soweto riots in June diverted attention from our cause. I was mopped up. The Mnanzi were also were mopped up. You see, the Thembeke wanted to push the Mnanzi family out of

power in the Fort Campbell valley. They sided with the government, and later with Matanzima, to achieve this aim. In any case the Mnanzi had become too independent for the likes of the white government and they were also harbouring comrades. In exchange for the Thembeke acting as informants and for controlling the homeland police, the regime imprisoned the Mnanzi chief and banned his sons to the Ciskei. They made Siphiwo the chief of the area.'

Professor Sibaya leans back in his chair, warming to the story. David gazes at the titles of the books on the shelves, feigning contemplation of his words.

'Since '76,' continues the professor, 'the Thembeke have run the chieftaincy with the military and the police on their side. I don't think they were harsh rulers. They enforced tribal justice fairly. They tried to keep the South African government out of their business as much as they could. You see, in these ways they won back the acceptance of the people, even if they could not win back their love. But now times have changed: the government is no longer their protector, the *impimpis* have retired out of shame or have been given "golden handshakes". The police are administered by comrades in Bisho.'

'But,' asks David, 'what would drive the Thembeke to sell people to the security police, to side with the white government? Why did anyone put up with it? If I were black and one of my people...'

Professor Sibaya grins a twisted line. 'Easy for you to say, my friend. The *impimpi* were given no respect, but we were not vindictive. They each had their reasons: some did it out of fear, others because they were indoctrinated. For some it was just a job which they left behind at the end of the day. Some of these men are still in power, like Siphiwo was. Some are even in government.'

‘So what was the Thembeke’s reason?’

‘You see, the Mnanzi and the Thembeke have been fighting for over two hundred years – the Thembeke were believers while the Mnanzi were unbelievers. You know about the believers and the unbelievers?’

‘Yes, of course,’ nods David. He has never heard of the believers or the unbelievers, but he wants the old man to get to the point.

‘Since the slaughter of the cattle the Thembeke have seen the Mnanzi as traitors to the Xhosa race, the Mnanzi have accused the Thembeke of being easily led astray by the whites. This is made worse by the fact that for nearly two hundred years, since the British squeezed the AmaXhosa out of half their tribal land, the two families have fought over the land of the Fort Campbell valley. But since ‘76 the fighting has been the most severe. Some of the Mnanzi joined the underground. Others stayed in the community and attacked the Thembeke by night, stealing their cattle, assaulting their women, burning their huts. For twenty-five years the conflict between these two families has become more and more bitter.’

David is looking at the Vodacom transmission tower outside: the ten-story-high metal spike is anchored by four wires. Beneath these is an advertisement for Vodacom. The cows have, during the time of Professor Sibaya’s speech, sidled towards the placard and now graze beneath it, as if Vodacom were advertising cows.

The professor pauses and rocks back in his chair, his eyes locked on David.

‘Do you see what I am saying?’

David turns from his contemplation of the tower and tries to read the man’s face.

‘Yes, I see.’

They sit in silence, Professor Sibaya waiting for David to respond.

‘So... you think the Mnanzi family was responsible for the murders?’

‘That’s my guess. Why, all of a sudden, I don’t know. Perhaps it was revenge for a past grievance, perhaps they all just got too drunk one night. Who knows?’

‘And Absalom?’

‘I think Absalom was ashamed of his family. We all knew, the community knew, that they were collaborators. Absalom knew what the Thembekas stood for. So perhaps your man is still alive. Maybe he wanted a new start, away from the family.’

‘You think he ran away?’

‘Well, we can only guess. His friends did not seem surprised when he disappeared. Perhaps they were expecting something.’

‘Any guesses as to where he might have gone?’

‘I have no idea. Maybe he went to Soweto, but really he could be anywhere from London to Gaborone. Perhaps he is farming vegetables in the bush somewhere. I wouldn’t know where to look. I doubt he told many people where he was going. I don’t think he would have wanted his family to track him down and drag him into their mess. Sipiwo might have tried to force him to fight for the family, threaten and coerce him into being an indoda. You see, for us, a man, an indoda, must fight and even die for his family. If you are not an indoda then you are nothing here.’

Professor Sibaya’s mobile phone rings, a high-pitched version of Bach’s Brandenburg Concerto. He picks it up and speaks in solemn Sotho, giving David a chance to stare out the window again, weighing up his options. Is this good news or bad news?

‘Please excuse me,’ says Professor Sibaya, clicking his phone shut. ‘That was my mother-in-law.’

David nods. 'A serious matter.'

'Indeed!'

The professor laughs, the sound deep and grainy.

He turns to David again. 'Also, Absalom was politically minded. This is only speculation, but maybe he left because he didn't want to associate with impimpis. Maybe he didn't want to live off the wealth they gained from being instruments of the regime.'

They sit in silence again.

'If he is alive, I'm not sure he'll want to be found,' he adds.

'Perhaps he can be persuaded,' says David. 'After all, the Thembeke are gone now. He has a chance to make up for the mistakes of his family.'

'I'm not sure he'll see it that way. But you are right: it's a possibility.'

'And I still have to find him. You've been very helpful, but I'm not much closer to finding Absalom.'

'I'm sorry I couldn't be of more help. Perhaps some of his friends would know more, but I'm not sure who they are, or if they would tell you anything if they did know.'

David thanks him again and rises to leave.

'Go well, Mister Barendse.'

'Stay well, Professor Sibaya.'

As he opens the door, the professor asks:

'Incidentally, which law-firm do you represent?'

David hands him his business card.

'GES'

'Interesting. Good luck for your search, I'm sure you'll need it.'

‘Thank you.’ David starts to walk out the door.

‘Especially considering that the family’s real lawyers, R&R, Randall and Randall, were here this morning. Goodbye.’

Professor Sibaya closes the door and David is left in the corridor, speechless. R&R?

## Chapter 5--ALICE

The Alice Hotel Cocktail Bar is almost empty and David sits alone at his plastic table. The cardboard cut-out flowers above the bar-counter irritate him and make the room seem even more deserted. The handful of people here keep to themselves: they read magazines or tap messages into their phones or, like David, they stare mournfully into their drinks. David fits one eyeball to the top of his beer-bottle, trying to see faces in the patterns of foam, grateful, at least, that the place has air-conditioning.

But he is not grateful for the position he has somehow been landed in, for it seems that he is now, unintentionally and reluctantly, forced to think politics. There has, to his mind, never been a thought as irrelevant as a thought about politics. A leaf on a tree with a vein that threads at an interesting angle holds more importance to him than the entire cess-pool of the political. He must now think about families, murders, rivalry, the police, conspiracies, the passage of time, the secret plans of rival lawyers – all, to his mind, completely useless avenues of thought.

Feeling despondent and somehow persecuted, he decides that he deserves a break and that it would be best to continue the next day with a fresh mind and a rested body. What's the worst that might happen? How could anyone, especially Simon, know if he takes the

afternoon off anyway? And didn't Simon land him in this mess in the first place? Besides, he needs some time to plan. He can't simply ask the first student he sees whether they know of Absalom Thembeka – that would draw too much attention. And even if he does find such a student, which is unlikely in the middle of summer, will they tell him anything? He imagines that after a few days he will phone Simon to say that Absalom has slipped away like a snake into the thorn-veld and will never be seen again, and Simon will tell him to look harder or find a new job.

Several drinks later he has had enough of the hotel bar and stumbles onto the street. The bright sun temporarily blinds him and he puts on his sunglasses. He tries to ignore the heat, which presses on him like an iron, even though his Acapulco top is unbuttoned. The sweat that springs up from his body does not evaporate into the soaked air. He steps slowly, like anyone raised in the tropics instinctively does, down towards the main road, pedestrians glancing sideways at him. Near the taxi-rank he finds a shebeen that advertises quarts for five rand, which astounds him. A handful of skollies stand outside. Their gaze follows David into their shebeen.

Inside it is cool and dark and smells of sorghum and spilled beer. After the bright street David can at first see nothing. Several indodas sit on low benches, nestling Hansa quarts on tables covered in plastic '*Castle Milk Stout*' table-cloths. An iron grille separates the tables from the till and the rows of alcohol. David orders a quart and sits in a corner, watching the room tick by. The men talk quietly, pretending to ignore him. The man behind the bar has a scar that stretches from his ear to the corner of his mouth. He is watching David with amusement.

He sips his cold beer with relief and watches the bright doorway and the street outside. He doesn't want to stare at the patrons. Professor Sibaya thinks Absalom has run away. Now what? If he does find Absalom is he, David, an unknown clerk, expected to persuade him to change his mind and return to Fort Campbell? Surely Absalom has his reasons for staying away? He is, after all, the only Thembeke still alive, so perhaps his reasons are good reasons. And if he refuses to return? There are too many strings to hold onto and David lets them go. He will think about it tomorrow.

Perhaps he can pick up some joint. The Transkei is, after all, where most of South Africa's marijuana, and the finest, is grown. He might as well do it while he can: it's not like he'll be able to simply take an afternoon off once he's back he's back in Cape Town, facing paperwork every day for the remainder of his legal apprenticeship. But the men in the shebeen ignore him, as if it is every day that an umlungu with gelled hair and camo pants and a floral shirt sits down in their midst to drink.

Two quarts later, one of the skollies outside – a thin man with an emaciated face, lacerated by scars – sits beside him. He whispers in a voice like sand blowing through grass:

'Howzit my friend.'

His name is Moses. They talk for a while: about the Transkei, Cape Town, cars, guns.

They finish their drinks. The man gets up to leave and moments later David follows him. He puts his sunglasses back on to protect his beer-sensitive eyes from the blinding sun. They walk past the taxi-rank and beyond the outskirts of the town to a grid of streets marked for RDP development, but where no houses have yet been built. The plots of land are covered in gravel and weeds and abandoned piles of bricks. Packs of mongrels scavenge among the waste.

Four skollies loiter around a corner beside the ruin of a building that must pre-date the development – only a single crumbling wall of bricks and a cracked foundation remain. The main man wears a blue bomber jacket and a tiny red cap. A thin gold chain hangs around his neck, over layers of scars and faded tattoos: ‘29’, ‘*Charlene forever*’, ‘*If God is with me, who can be against me?*’ He casts a thin eye over David as he walks up.

‘Dzy?’

David nods. The man speaks a rapid mixture of Xhosa and Afrikaans. His name is Solomon.

‘How much you want?’ he says, his voice no more than a rough scrape.

‘Just a bankie.’

‘Walk with my friend,’ says the man from the shebeen, nodding towards Solomon.

Another skollie, this one with puffed alcoholic cheeks and almost no teeth, disagrees and tugs at David’s shirt.

‘No, walk with me.’

He smells of stale beer, his beard is matted with grass and dirt and his eyes are yellow. David pushes him away and follows Solomon into an empty field of overgrown gravel.

‘You don’t want more? You can take home.’

‘No thanks. Just a bankie. You know: I’m on holiday.’

‘That’s nice. Holiday.’

He smiles, his lips like a scar across his face. ‘Eighty Rand?’

‘Are you crazy? I pay less than that in Cape Town!’

The scar stretches further.

‘Eighty.’

‘I buy up in Durban for fifteen. I’ll give you thirty. Come on.’

‘Fifty, that’s all.’

They haggle the price down to forty Rand. Solomon hands it over in a Pick ‘n Pay packet. David sniffs: it seems fine.

‘You want a skyf?’

‘Ja.’

David follows him back to the corner, where Solomon lights a joint. As David inhales he once again sees Angeline walking along the beach, beads of sweat running down her chest and disappearing into her cleavage (He thinks of how Angeline also loves the beach, the heat-wavering air, the beads of sweat, the Antarctic waters). His Pagan Baby. The group do not speak as they pass the joint around. When they reach the end of the joint David exhales a large ball of smoke and as he passes it on he says: ‘My friends, I’m looking for someone here in the Ciskei.’

They stare at him, impassive.

‘His name is Absalom Thembeka.’

They do not move, except for Solomon, who turns his head to stare into the distance. He drops the roach into the gravel and grinds it absently with the ball of his foot. They stand around in silence. The sun beats down on their heads, puffs of cloud dot the sky.

Solomon pulls a bottle-neck from inside his jacket and more grass from another pocket and starts stuffing the glass.

‘DP.’

David nods slowly.

‘From the jungle.’ says Solomon, splitting his scar to reveal toothless gums between long yellow canines.

David grins back. He is watching Solomon’s friends.

After the bottle-neck Solomon says: ‘Ja. I know this guy. Absalom was my bra.’

‘Ja?’

The four consult in Xhosa. David stares at the grass growing through the ruins of the old building. The cracks in the concrete foundation form swirling patterns.

‘You want to buy some more?’ asks Solomon.

David coughs heavily.

‘Ja. If I find my friend I’ll want more. Dagga.’

‘Yes. Maybe if you want more, you will find your friend.’

‘Ja.’

‘OK, my friend. I hope you find him. If you find him come buy some more from me.’

David senses that they have had enough of him. No good. He pulls out a packet of cigarettes and offers them around the circle. They each pull one out and light up.

‘Maybe I’ll buy some just in case I find him.’

‘Yes, my friend. Buy him a stocking.’

‘Six bankies?’

‘Ja. Only one thousand.’

David laughs. ‘You are funny, my friend.’

‘Ja.’ says Solomon, baring his gums as he blows smoke into David’s face.

‘Two-hundred for a stocking.’

They haggle the price down to five-hundred, which is extortion here at the source of South Africa's marijuana supply.

Solomon crushes his cigarette into the gravel. One of his friends disappears into the bushes and returns with a stocking full of grass. David pulls five-hundred rand from his wallet. His hand does not shake – if they had wanted to rob him they would have done so already. They exchange hand-to-hand.

'Absalom was mos driver for me,' says Solomon. 'He drove our stuff from up there,' he points north towards Fort Campbell, 'and down to Cape Town. Years ago year he went up to Jozi to live, I don't know why. He has some business there, you know.'

'Ja?'

'Ja.'

'I can set up a meeting with someone in Soweto who works with Absalom.'

Solomon chatters into his mobile phone in rapid Zulu. David stands and nods at the others, no-one really sure of what is happening.

'My friend is called George. Phone him when you get to Jozi. He will meet you at the taxi-rank outside Baragwanath.'

David enters George's number into his phone.

'You give Absalom the stocking when you find him.'

'Ja. Sure.'

They all smoke another cigarette and the sun is hitting his head like a cricket bat and the floor is heaving like a tequila-rotten stomach.

'One love,' he says, punching his chest then Solomon's fist.

'Irie,' says Solomon, looking away, his voice like a knife against whetstone.

David turns and walks back into Alice alone. He cannot find his hotel, everything looks the same: the buildings, the people, the streets. All equally absurd and equally flushed with meaning. He is nauseous and afraid that he will spend the night on the streets of Alice. His feet take him where they will. Hours seem to pass, but he knows that his sense of time is disturbed. He browses in the shops, feigning interest in the cheap furniture available on hire-purchase, the badly-styled clothes in colours only suitable for dark skin, the interminable rows of sunglasses and phone-covers and baseball-caps.

Outside the PEP clothing store sit a row of women selling live sheep. The animals are trussed up on the floor, panting. Behind each sheep is a pile of dung and a puddle of urine. Their eyes are wide and they dart around desperately. David watches a long black Mercedes stop beside the chattering women. A slim young woman in a grey suit steps out and selects a sheep. Two of the women take the bleating animal by its hooves and sling it into her boot. She pays them four hundred rand and drives away. Four hundred rand? Is that expensive or a bargain? He talks to the sheep-sellers, expressing his concern for the poor state of the animals. They laugh at him: sheep are stupid. They don't know they are going to die. In any case they will probably die for a good cause: at a wedding or a circumcision or a funeral. What more could a sheep ask for?

David has no response. He continues his aimless walk and eventually he comes across the hotel. He steps carefully to his room, self-conscious and obviously unsteady on his feet. He falls face-forward onto his unmade bed and is asleep within seconds. *Dikgerook*.

His sleep is heavy and dreamless and when he awakes later in the afternoon he feels refreshed. He remains on his back, for some time, trying to piece together his fractured memories of the afternoon, staring at the ceiling and the light-bulb. His head feels stuffed

with greased thoughts on which his mind can get no firm hold. He showers, returns to bed and sits up to phone Simon. Simon answers hastily – he is on the thigh-extension machine at the Point Gym, in the middle of his afternoon session – and David explains his discoveries.

‘R&R must be representing the Mnanzi. Be careful around them – they probably hope to confirm that Absalom is already dead. But they’ll have to take guesses now. I doubt they’ll have your luck. What were the odds of you running into someone who knew Absalom?’

‘Yeah, well, if he had dropped out and was avoiding his family...’

‘Yeah, I guess. But try to keep things quiet. Rumours are starting to fly around.’

‘Of course.’

David writes off his purchase from Solomon as a bribe.

‘I had to bribe this guy five-hundred rand to find out where Absalom was. He seemed to be the leader of some local gang or something, so I wanted it all to be, you know, cool and stuff. With the locals.’

He isn’t sure if Simon is seeing through this ruse, but doesn’t really care: how would Simon prove how he had spent the money? He would probably have had to pay someone sooner or later anyway. No harm done: he would rather have the marijuana, and rather have bought something from Solomon anyway. It’s less suspicious. He asks Simon for more money.

‘I’m going to need more in Joburg. Possibly quite a lot more.’

‘Ja, I’ll put more money into your account. But be careful: spending too much will draw attention to you, which you don’t want. Don’t come off too rich. And try not to spend all our money.’

David cuts the call and falls back into the bed. He has to leave for Joburg the next morning. An urge comes over him to leave right now, this very minute. He is suddenly sick of the Transkei and Ciskei and their stinking heat and atmosphere dense with murder and silence and people who speak in a language he does not understand, who he is now convinced speak in conspiracies, even though he continuously reminds himself not to be paranoid: just because you are out of Cape Town doesn't mean you are in hell. Perhaps purgatory, but not hell. *No one here is going to kill me*, he thinks.

But he is too lazy to act on his impulse to leave, so he crawls back under his sheets and sleeps fitfully until he wakes, suddenly disorientated, the next day.

University of Cape Town

## Chapter 6--SOWETO

*Whaffug?*

*Whaffugs append?*

His lips feel glued to something. He hears the sound of a dog barking angrily, incessantly, only a few feet away, in time with the beat of a headache that threatens to split his skull. *Whaffug?*

He tries to open his eyes but they are also stuck against his pillow. He is spinning, still drunk. But from what? From when?

The beginnings of memory, flashes. He cannot connect the dots.

Impact assessment: drunk, hung-over, limbs feel intact, no clothes on. Wait, there is something on his head. He lifts an arm and feels around. A hat? A crown? A memory punches him and he hesitates. A crown... he was king... *shit*. Was that *real*?

He explores his face with his fingers and prises it from the pillow, to which it is fixed with a sticky, grainy glue. But the pillow feels... this is not a pillow. His face is stuck to a breast.

Trying to keep the nausea and sense of random motion at bay, he unglues himself from the body he has woken on and wipes the remaining gunk from his eyes. With surprise

and resignation he realises that he is not in his hotel room in Alice. Is he in Alice at all? As Rana, that bastard Jew-boy, would say: *oi vey*.

This is a bedroom. He is in a double bed with an ornate wrought-iron frame. Heavy chocolate-coloured curtains block out a bright sun, although a few shafts break through to illuminate white particles floating in the thick air. Sharing his bed, twisted onto her side and with both wrists cuffed to the iron frame, is a naked, beautiful girl with charcoal-black West-African skin. She is unconscious but breathing lightly and, like David, is covered in thick congealed blood. Her breasts and hips swell slightly from an otherwise slender frame, and the tips of her fingers and her lips are a matte brownish-pink. *Where have I seen you before?* The rough mechanical barking outside the window derails every train of thought he tries to embark on.

He squeezes the sticky blood through his fingers. There is some kind of powder mixed into it, also powder scattered across the bed, over the floor, floating in the air. He dusts some off his thighs and runs a finger across his gums – good quality coke. Is he in Joburg? He picks his way out of bed, careful not to disturb the girl, and treads carefully across the clothes-strewn floor. He nearly falls when he steps onto a blood-covered twelve-inch dildo, but he reaches the white-dusted dresser and inspects his reflection in the three mirrors. A cardboard crown sits at a jaunty angle on his matted hair. He swipes it off and examines his face for breakages. He can find none, but his mouth and jaw are blood-soaked and a rivulet still runs from his nose into the clotting mess on his upper lip. He licks his lips with a fat hung-over tongue to taste the metal of blood and chews on the coagulated mess he retrieves and makes plans to capture the dog and spend the rest of the day torturing it with a blow-torch, a drill and a set of pliers.

This isn't a hotel room. A poster of Ashanti looks down on him. Did Lebo do this? That *fuck*. Is he in Lebo's house? He was in a car... he was leaving Alice... he opened the packet of grass and decided there and then... There were forests, rivers, a dead cow on the road whose entrails wound around his wheel, pulling half the cow out along with them... mountains... a thunderstorm...

He tries to wipe the blood from his face but only spreads it further. Swearing under his breath, he constructs a line from the dust on the dresser and *zip* feels much better. He picks his shirt off the floor and rubs some of the blood off his face, neck, hands, chest, knees; finds his jeans and pulls them on. He checks the girl's body for signs of damage, but can see none. On the contrary she seems perfectly formed, perfectly intact. Even restful.

He opens the door just enough to see a white tiled hallway littered with beer cans and cigarette ash and lined with closed doors. The tiles cold to his feet, he pads down the hallway, at the end of which there is what appears to be a seventies black porn-set, '*Gang Bangs of New York*' or '*New Orleans Orgy*'. Cinnamon leather couches line the walls, a kidney-shaped coffee table is covered with bottles of vodka, ash-trays, condoms, sunglasses. Outside, beyond the sheet-glass wall, the sun is shining onto a lawn and a swimming pool on which an inflatable crocodile drifts idly. A slate fireplace has two AK47s hung above the mantel-piece, crossed like swords. Lebo is passed out on one of the couches. *So I'm in Soweto*, he thinks. *Great*.

He picks a pair of Ray-Bans from the table and ventures outside. It is a perfect highveld day: warm, distant puffs of cloud in the sky, a light breeze from no particular direction. He strips again and dives into the pool, washing off the blood and the coke, absorbing water through his parched skin to ease his axe-wielding hangover. A few lengths

of breast-stroke restore his senses and the violent spinning slows down. More memories pop up: the endless mielie-fields of the Free State, the mighty Orange River, joint after joint in the Landie, top-down, bottoms up. Police? Were there police? A drunken fight with Simon? Standing in the middle of a mielie-field, peeing in a circle (what possessed him?), shouting into his phone that this was ridiculous, that he was wasting his time, this was a wild goose chase. Jesus. What did Simon say?

After his swim he lies on the warm tiles to dry. When he opens his eyes Lebo is standing over him, looking freshly showered and wearing a pair of ivory silk boxers. Big and stately, a Terror Lekota from his younger days, Lebo has the body of a rugby player and the face of an Olmec statue. But he has slackened a bit since varsity: a slight beer-boep hangs over his boxers and his once taught arms seem more like slabs of meat than balls of steel. He is wearing the enormous gold-rimmed Ray-Bans that David had stolen from the lounge.

‘Aita,’ he says in his deep Sotho accent.

‘Hi Lebo. What did you do to me, you bastard.’

‘You were already done when you got here. You arrived in a puff of smoke. How was Miss Senegal?’

‘Uh?’

‘Patrice. Miss Senegal 1998. There were noises coming from your room.’

‘Oh... where are my glasses? This sun is too damn bright.’

‘Right-o,’ he says in a parody of a British accent.

‘Super.’

Lebo starts towards the house.

‘Broe,’ says David, ‘where are we?’

‘Soweto, my friend. Diepkloof. My house.’

‘Excellent. And where is breakfast?’

They sit outside, in the shade of a pear tree that Lebo’s father planted many years ago. Zola, a pretty young girlfriend, has brought them an English breakfast and cold Heinekens.

‘When you arrived last night you were bonged out of your mind, bru. *Dikgerook*. You stepped out of your car in this, like, puff of yellow smoke. You said you had been hotboxing your Landie since the Engen with the bridge and the Steers. I gave you a line to sort you out and you went fuckin’ crazy. Started shouting at Joe, the only other whitey at the party, something about Tsotsis going to kill us all, blah blah blah. Fuck bru. I had to give you a bottle of vodka to sort you out and that seemed to work. You ended up with Patrice and her sister on your lap. They’ve just flown down from Dakar to go shopping in Jozi and they heard about my party from Mandoza who was there last year to visit Goree. You know what I’m saying?’

David is munching heartily at his breakfast. It feels like he hasn’t eaten for days. Through a mouthful of scrambled egg and a sip of beer he nods his assent. Disconnected memories are edging into his mind’s eye. Hazy, disturbed images. Lebo enjoys a good monologue.

‘Ja, so you were sitting there and you pushed the two girls off your lap and grabbed the AK’s off the wall and started running around screaming, trying to herd everyone into the lounge, saying something from the Godfather. Bru you were baked. Ja: “It’s all in the family!” you were saying in some dumb-ass Italian accent. “It’s in the fuckin’ family!”’.

Then these models from Somalia rugby-tackled you but they were drunk and started trying to get it on right there, on the floor. Fuck bru. Warn me next time you gonna crash my party.'

Lebo sips his beer and stares into the distance, long-suffering.

'Then we all started doing lines because Vusi had just brought in a shipment from Angola and...'

'Vusi, friends-with-Max Vusi?'

'Ja man.'

'Was Max here?'

'Ja. You had long talks with him. He was giving you some papers about something.'

'Fuck. I don't remember that at all.'

'Max arrived late. By then we were already well into the lines. Vusi, like, covered the table like he was baking, like he was baking bread. After that... bru...'

Yes: Patrice dragging him, stumbling, towards the bedroom, snorting out of her cupped hands. He was King David, she Queen of Sheba – she cut him a cardboard crown. Then he was a slave-boy, a young David, then she... his concubine. Blood erupting from his nose, the coke going up in a cloud, the blood massing in streaks down his chest and in gripped stripes down her back, her hips, her throat, her buttocks. Someone banging on the door, ignoring them... a blur.

'But what about Max?' he asks Lebo. 'Do you remember what Max had for me?'

'No. It was private. I put all your stuff in my room to keep it safe. Your papers are probably there.'

Lebo lights a cigarette and they sit in silence while Zola undresses and swims a delicate breast-stroke up and down the pool, her brown skin shining with life against the turquoise salted water.

The bullet from Siphiso's kraal is still in his pocket. Zola finishes her swim and dries off, and he watches her through the eye of the bullet as she flutters out her towel and settles onto a deck-chair. Lebo returns with two more beers and settles into another deck-chair. David checks his phone: there are text messages from Rana (about paperwork) and Angeline (asking how his holiday is going) and a photo-message from Georgina showing her naked from the waist up with half a bottle of Moët down her throat, sent at 4:57 a.m. A voice message from Sven: he has booked *Caprice* for a party to welcome this season's contingent of Slovenian models.

The last message is from Simon, 4:15 p.m. yesterday: 'Listen David. Firstly, never call me when you're drunk again. Secondly, I know you're concerned about safety. It's understandable. But it would be a waste to give up now. Bradley tells me that R&R are also on the trail, but you're a step ahead. You were lucky to find a lead in Soweto, so don't waste your advantage. Also, believe me, safety is relative. You are safe right now. You'll know if you're not safe. Just meet your man and get back to me. Call me on my cell. By the way, I put that ten thousand rand into your account. Keep it safe.'

What did he say to Simon? What money? Yesterday is only becoming more blurred. He rummages through the tog-bag from Lebo's room and finds a tequila-soaked wad of two-hundred rand notes. For George? Also in the tog bag is the file Max left for him. There is only one piece of paper inside: an enlarged copy of a photograph, what looks like an ID

picture. A man's face stares out at him defiantly. The resemblance to Little Mandla is striking: a heavy jaw, hooded, almost oriental, eyes, high cheek-bones, a wide mouth set in grim determination. Yet his eyes seem vacant, as if his thoughts were elsewhere or veiled in the darkness behind each black iris.

Lebo has printed the pictures on his camera. David spreads them out: a picture of Siphiwo's blood-covered floor, boot-prints and bits of body scattered like shrapnel, the television shot through and shattered. A picture of the doorway, the river-delta of blood flowing into the gravel, outside the kraals and the humid sky. A picture of the ceiling, punctured with bullet-holes, the window broken and its glass scattered. A picture of the wardrobe with both doors open, a pool of blood collected on the floor.

'What happened here?' asks David, as if Lebo would know.

'Looks like... ja...'

Neither can find an answer.

'It's not burglars. All their stuff is still there.'

'Ja.'

'Someone just wanted them dead.'

There are more pictures: a troop of Samango monkeys in an enormous Wild Fig tree. The Landie parked beside a sign that says 'Penhoek Pass, 1655 metres', overlooking rows of jagged sunburnt mountains and bottomless valleys. A stone monument beneath a weeping willow. The plaque says 'Aliwal North Concentration Camp, 1903. Thirty thousand lives were lost in British concentration camps during the Anglo-Boer war'. The Orange River, fat and brown and sluggish, crowded by bush. Mielie fields, a 1-Stop, a close-up of a mielie, a

circle of trampled plants with a pile of rocks in the centre. A photograph of a furniture store with a black man in a patterned waistcoat pulling a thumbs-up, grinning.

He is discussing the pictures with Lebo and Zola, trying to construct a history of the previous day, when his phone starts beeping manically. He has left a reminder to himself (he has acquired the habit of doing so in his worst states, when some inner voice tells him he is past memory, past responsibility): *George 12:00*, followed by directions to his shebeen. He checks his watch: 11:15.

Yes, the shadow of a memory, phoning George while driving through sunflower-fields, the sun beating on his head, his eyes swimming. The agreement, the meeting.

Lebo knows: David had ranted about the meeting the previous night.

‘Dude, we need to leave in five minutes.’

‘*Dude*, it’s Saturday. Chill.’

‘Come on Lebo. I’ll owe you big-time.’

‘You already owe me big-time. Look what you did to my house. Look at my spare room.’

‘I’ll take you guys out tonight. We’ll hit Rivonia, all on me. Come-on.’

Lebo eases himself off his chair, and limps towards the house, feigning great pain.

‘Come on broe, I’ve got stuff riding on this.’

‘Come though in a minute,’ he says. David hears him pacifying Brutus, the giant albino Boer-Bull that had woken David, and locking him into the house. He unlocks the side-gate and walks around to the front yard. Brutus snarls and slams against the security-gate, fixing David with red eyes, bringing on an aftershock of headache. Lebo’s father, always a freedom fighter, had trained the dog to attack whiteys, and he has never learned new tricks.

Lebo's cars – a Lexus, a Hilux, and a Mazda roadster – stand in the front yard. David's Landie is parked diagonally, half on the grass verge, the lights on and the driver's door open. *Aysh*. David glances inside, looking for clues. What happened yesterday? The inside of the car stinks of stale smoke and is littered with mud, beer-cans, grass, Rizlas, coke-bottles, Steers packets, till-slips, banana skins, Red-Bull cans, torn-up papers, loose CDs, whole mielie plants, some rocks, a small refrigerator and a pair of wet swimming shorts. What happened? When? How? The plastic packet lies open on the passenger seat, about half the grass missing. How? That's about four bankies. He couldn't have smoked it all. Did he have help? Did he give it away? Throw it away? He remembers the inside of a furniture shop, trying to buy a fridge on hire-purchase, offering the grass as... what? The memory slips away. He must have been pretty caned. Why? Why does he do this to himself? He doesn't know, and there is no time to think about it now.

They take the Lexus and cruise through the suburban roads of Diepkloof, Ashanti blaring, Lebo wearing a big grin, still holding a beer. This is comrade country: they pass Mandela's old house, Sisulu's old house, Tutu's old house, Winnie's current mansion of face-brick nightmares. They pass a church and a row of shops. Lunch-time shoppers crowd the stores and the street and the sound of a gospel choir surges from the church, competing with Lebo's gangsta rap, Fifty Cent shouting *Bitches an' Hell*, the Soprano *Hallelujah*.

They take a sudden turn into a back-street, between a dusty football-pitch, where a Saturday match is in progress, and a row of shops: a barber, a Vodaphone shop, a butchery, a cafe. They veer off again, between rows of shacks. 'Short-cut,' says Lebo. They bounce down a narrow pot-holed street, into the heart of a sprawling squatter settlement. David has seen it all before – Crossroads, Khayelitsha, Philippi, Brown's Farm. The labyrinth of

corrugated iron and plastic, the narrow foot-paths, the piles of garbage, the packs of mongrels scavenging in the mess. Cows, goats, chickens, children, cripples - all compete for their patch of sodden earth. But he has never seen it on this scale; here the shacks stretch to the horizon, an ocean of poverty. Fifty Cent is still blasting and people emerge from the shacks to look, some with envy, some with approval, others with ambition: they too want a Lexus, a pool, Ray Bans. Snot-nosed children emerge from the shacks to get a better look. Mothers try to hold them back, glowering. Lebo waves at them, David pulls an Island Style sign. The children tag behind the car, imitating Lebo and David, laughing.

The road turns and runs along the bank of a river, a channel clogged with dying reeds, garbage, the rusting shells of cars. Shacks lean dangerously over the eroding bank on the other side. A dead goat lies under the rusted remains of a Venture, its stomach bloated and its teeth protruding from receding lips.

‘Great neighbourhood,’ says David.

‘Yeah. Real estate is pretty cheap.’

‘Lifestyle’s a bit kuk though.’

Lebo finishes his beer and drops it from the window. ‘Leaves a bit to be desired,’ he says in his fake British voice.

‘Yeah, but not as bad as London.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah.’

David has been to London – he lived there for two years between his undergraduate days and his law degree, hanging out with Max and Christina in Old Street or Soho, sharing a digs in Kilburn. He had never seen such poverty, people working from dawn to dusk,

spending what free time they have shopping or drunk out of their minds or watching telly which consists mostly of advertising for products they don't need and can't afford. Such poverty, such unhappiness. He felt sorry for the natives. But then, this was their culture, and one must not be disparaging.

They nearly collide with a bunch of teenagers talking in the road. The boys run after the car, shouting, the girls are coy. Lebo swears at the boys then sticks his head out the window, shouting at the girls: 'Sugarbaby! *Where you going?*'

'Hey David, I got a joke for you,' says Lebo, back in the car, lighting a cigarette.

'Yeah?'

'What's yellow and cuts grass?'

'What?'

'Hey – it's my kaffir and I can paint it any colour I want.'

'That's hilarious.'

'Ja. I thought so too.'

Ahead of them the Baragwanath-Chris Hani Hospital rises above the rubble. Serving five million people, the size of a small suburb, the hospital is really a collection of hospitals, a few dozen connected buildings. Opposite the entrance is a bustling taxi-rank. Crowds jostle in the streets, roadside stands sell beanies, t-shirts, skinned cow-heads, rows of sorghum beer in old Coke bottles.

They park and Lebo points out a shack on the next corner. 'That's it. I'm going shopping, maybe buy some beer. Call me when you done.'

Crowds of commuters shuffle past the shebeen, to and from the taxi rank. The building's hand-painted walls sport adverts for Hansa, Coca Cola, Klipdrift, Vodacom. A bunch of tsotsis stand outside the entrance. David walks up, cautious, ignoring the calls of *umlungu*, *whitey*, *boer*, *hey boy* and *inkwenkwe* that come from all directions. Two heavies guarding the door ask David why he is here. When he mentions George they shout into the darkness of the Shebeen. Voices shout back. They search him and grudgingly let him through, promising that he is being watched.

After the bright sun outside, the shebeen is dark and smoky, but it seems much larger and more luxurious than the exterior suggested. Interconnected rooms house a bar, a lounge, two pool tables, an empty dance floor. Punters sit at the bar and on the leather couches in the lounge, talking quietly and drinking Heinekens, Zambezi Lager, Johnnie Walker, Remy Martin. They wear suits or chino's with golf shirts, tasselled shoes, gold rings. Kwaito blares softly from two small speakers on the bar.

David orders a white Russian. The barman, short and fat with a dour, pock-marked face, points towards a corner of the lounge, where three smartly dressed men and three women in tight black lycra sit around a table covered with bottles of Johnnie Walker Blue Label. One of the men points a finger at David. *You, come here*. David makes his way towards the corner. The man mutters something and the girls scatter, but the heavies on either side of him remain, fixing David with stares that say unambiguously: *thin ice*.

He rises and shakes David's hand, African-style. Tall and lightly built, his handsome features are marred by a thick scar across his throat. He wears sand-coloured linen trousers, sandals, and a white silk shirt. His expression is bemused and incredulous.

‘Good-day Umlungu.’ His voice is deep. He has a thick Zulu accent. He learnt English on the street, not from a book.

‘Hello George.’

‘How are you today?’

‘I’m well. How are you?’

‘You know: up and down.’

‘I see.’

‘Everyone must make a living.’

‘Yes.’ He looks around. ‘I like your shebeen.’

‘Thank you. Not easy running a shebeen, not with these skelems,’ he waves his arm at the patrons, ‘running around.’

They sit and talk about David’s drive to Joburg (memories of which he fabricates), the poor state of the roads, the latest football results, whiskey, women.

‘Would you like an *umfazi*, Mister Barendse?’ says George, nodding towards a corner of girls.

‘I would love to have a girlfriend. Life is lonely when you’re travelling. But I’m afraid I have no time for girlfriends. I’m here on business.’

George signals for the heavies to leave. David finishes his drink and George offers him a whiskey, which he gladly accepts.

‘So, umlungu, you are here on business. Talk business. What do you have for me? And what do I have for you?’

David explains his search, leaving out what Simon had told him about development in the valley. George listens patiently, without interruption. When David is finished he lights a cigarette and leans back in his chair.

‘So, you have answered one question. You want me to give you Absalom. For some reason I am not surprised by this. But what about the other question? What do *you* have for *me*?’

‘Ten thousand rand.’

George chuckles under his breath and sips at his drink. ‘What must I do with that? Buy a new pair of shoes?’

David laughs with him. ‘Yes, you gotta pay for a decent pair of shoes nowadays.’

A short, buxom woman, a Brenda Fassie look-alike (peace be upon her), tries to sit on George’s lap, and he brushes her off.

‘That’s just a sign of my commitment,’ says David. ‘There is much more at stake for you.’

He tells George of the rumours of development, the power and money that Absalom is due.

‘If you help Absalom, I’m sure he’ll help you. You’ll be close to one of the richest and most powerful men in the Eastern Cape. I’m sure he will be able to arrange... compensation... either from himself or from the developers. You might suddenly become a land-holder. Land that might suddenly be worth millions.’

‘Might... maybe... Who are you to say that I am not already a land-holder, that I don’t already have links with the people I need?’

‘The people in charge of Fort Campbell are dead. Absalom will be the new chief.’

‘Yes. So I’ve been told.’ George is silent and stares at the women in the corner until David is almost prompted to speak again. But George continues: ‘You are the second person today who has come to me with this request. This morning I met a lawyer from R&R. He offered me fifty thousand to connect him with Absalom. I’m starting to think that I should contact Absalom myself. He told me the same story you are telling me now. But I could not give him what he wanted. I do not have contact with Absalom, he is no longer in Soweto. But I connected this man with someone who does know where Absalom is, the man who is protecting him. I can put you in touch with him, but I’m afraid your friends at R&R will get to Absalom first.’

The whiskey, the comedown, the residue of drunkenness, are making David feel cocky. ‘I think you will find, George, that I get to Absalom first.’

George grimaces, ‘Yes, I like an optimist.’

‘You have nothing to lose, George.’

‘Do not tell me what I have or don’t have.’

‘Do not tell me whether I will fail or succeed.’

George raises his glass. ‘We have made our first deal.’

He phones his connection, speaking authoritatively in Swazi. David eyes the women in the corner, thinking of his next move. George puts down his phone and turns to David.

‘The man you will meet is called Pius. He is in charge of our export operations in Swaziland. He sends our stuff to the US, England, Netherlands, Germany, Russia. Anywhere. Now, there have been many attempts on Absalom’s life. He moved here in the first place to escape his uncle, who was trying to kill him. Then, last year, someone from the Mnanzi family came here to take him out. He got five bullets, but none were deadly, and he

just survived. After that I sent him to work with Pius in Swaziland. He was no longer safe here. You can see that I did the right thing. Look what happened to the rest of his family.'

Always stroke the ego, it saps intelligence. 'Yes, of course. You saved his life.'

George laughs at the flattery. 'Since then more people, also, I think, from the Mnanzi family, have asked me where he is, saying that they have important news for him, that they need to see him as soon as possible. People, Mr Barendse, like you.'

George refills his tumbler and stares at David, suddenly mirthless. He leans forward and for the first time David notices that George's bottom eyelids protrude, leaving two red rings beneath his eyes. 'My first concern is for Absalom. If anything happens to him, you will be in... serious trouble.'

'I guarantee his safety.'

'You can guarantee no such thing. You have no control over who might hurt him once he's in public again, especially in such circumstances. Are you sure you can take this risk? I repeat: if Absalom gets hurt, you will get hurt.'

'I have to take that risk. It's my job.'

David is not at all sure of this, but there is no time for doubt now. 'I'll do my best to keep him safe.'

George leans back again and stares into David's eyes, his face dead. He lights a cigarette. 'Some people say that when I talk about shooting, when I talk about killing, that I don't really mean what I say, that I don't really believe what I say.'

His eyes are solemn, unwavering.

'If you believe that, I kill *you*.'

'I've heard that line before Slim.'

George looks back with a total lack of recognition. Shit – perhaps this is the Original?

‘Pius works in the bush on the Swazi border. I cannot send you there, the place is secret, but he will be at the Royal Swazi Sun on Monday, to play golf. Wait for him at the ninth hole around two o’clock.’

David leaves the wad of notes on the table.

‘Thanks for your help, George.’

‘You are wasting your money, inkwenkwe. R&R will find Absalom first. They are meeting Pius before you. They will have a head start.’

‘If I don’t go, George, I’ll never know.’

‘Then I wish you good luck.’

George calls his heavies back, which David takes as a sign that the meeting is over. He bids them farewell and leaves the shebeen. Outside, the sun is bright. He immediately puts on his sunglasses and breathes a deep sigh of relief, thankful to still be alive. He rounds the corner to return to the spot where Lebo dropped him off when he feels a fist in his stomach and another to his face. The ground rises to smack him between the eyes in a shower of sparks and all is suddenly black and silent.

## Chapter 7--SANDTON

He is sitting in 'Café Illy' in the giant, overpriced Sandton City shopping complex, sipping a cappuccino. The café is on a mezzanine level, overlooking an indoor plaza and a Persian-rug market, so he is also watching the well-groomed crowd milling around below, humming like fattened cattle in a pen. He is sullenly mulling over his day so far. After the meeting with George and the brief acquaintance with his heavies, he had regained consciousness in a narrow alley between rows of derelict shacks. An anorexic mongrel was nosing through the garbage around and under him. He felt around for his phone, but it was missing, along with his watch, his shoes and his shirt.

With no way of contacting Lebo, he staggered around helplessly, trying to borrow money from commuters at the taxi rank. But he was only met with mockery and disdain: a dishevelled whitey begging in the middle of Soweto, *haibo*. He tried the reception desk at Baragwanath, but received little sympathy: he could walk and talk, which, by local standards, meant he needed no attention. The receptionist, an obese woman whose face seemed to be moulded from jelly, would not let him use the phone, explaining that a thousand people wandered in every day wanting something for nothing, and he was no exception. When he explained that he had just been mugged, she replied with finality that mugging was

a police matter and not her problem. Eventually Lebo found him wandering around the taxi-rank, looking for a phone, hoping for a plan.

On the way home they stopped at a Diepkloof shopping mall, and after a quick vodka tonic to calm David's nerves, they replaced his phone, charging it to his expense account. But, as the sanguine Sotho salesman explained to the shirtless, shoeless David, it takes twenty-four hours for the new SIM card to activate.

'But I could be missing calls as we speak!' David complained, only to be met by a wan smile. Without his phone he felt disconnected from life - without numbers, without time. Compounded by his aching bruises and nausea, his abrasive introduction to George, and his sense that the search for this elusive client was slipping out of control, this news sent David into a mild state of panic, and he started jabbering to Lebo about giving up, going home, screw GES and their stupid plans, why must *he* get the bruised ribs, please, someone, in the name of God, organise me a joint.

Lebo had seen this state before, usually after a long weekend of abuse followed by the prospect of work. He shook David by the shoulders.

'Get a grip!' he shouted, 'It's Saturday!'

On Lebo's advice David rummaged through his files, looking for phone numbers. Luckily, Max had scrawled his mobile number on the top corner of the photograph of Absalom. Yes: time to phone Max, his juju god-father, his panic-mechanic. Max is an old friend from the days of Diocesan College, where, along with David, Lebo and Rana, he had idled away his school hours smoking cigarettes behind the cricket-nets and playing truant during Afrikaans lessons. Maximillian was the most reckless of these errant boys, but as the son of a Nigerian diplomat and 'businessman' he carried certain advantages - his falls were

always cushioned by a thick pile of money. Max scraped through his law degree with a string of lower thirds. At UCT he made a name for himself by arriving late and parking illegally in the largest, golddest Mercedes known to man, wearing an oversized track-suit, reflective Ray-Bans and chunks of gold on every knuckle. He would disappear into the toilet and arrive in the lecture theatre wiping his nose, his focussed eyes darting around, and immediately start writing totally unconnected notes.

On his graduation Max was hired by one of the largest firms in Johannesburg. They provided a corner-office in a plush Sandton low-rise, furnished with a plasma screen television, leather couches, a Sony Playstation and a fridge with an ice-machine. His job description was simple: have lunch with certain African clients and attend meetings as a silent, brooding 'legal consultant'. This is not to say that Max isn't busy. From his office, undisturbed by his employers, he works quasi-legal wonders for his 'friends' and compatriots: inventing companies, erasing records, tracking money and information. Max is a magician, a financial healer, a spiritual man.

'Max!' David shouted into Lebo's phone.

'Dude,' he replied in his slow, lilting baritone of a Nigerian accent. A relic of an old school game: Max is Max, Dave is Dude.

'Max!'

'Dude.'

'Max!'

'Dude: am I real?'

'No. You are a figment of my imagination.'

'Good. How you like your picture?'

‘Looks just like his father.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Dude... ah-ah, why you calling me now? Wi’ dis me trouble go enta...’

‘Chill, Max, it’s cool. I’m not causing any trouble.’

‘Yeah right, an’ I’m no’ lawyer, Abi?’

‘Fuck Max...’

‘Dude.’

‘Fuck... I need your help man.’

‘Yeah?’

‘I’m in a *situation*.’

‘I know, you phone me yesterday and I see you las’ night. I have some... interesting information for you dey.’

They had agreed to meet at Café Illy. After a shower, a change of clothes and six aspirins David was in the Landie, charging up the M1 towards Joburg. All the cars were speeding, even the trucks. A friend of his once hypothesised that they (the Government? Anarchists? Hippies? Aliens?) put coke in the water supply here. That’s why everyone drives so fast. Suddenly, at 140, he was in the slow lane. He floored it and swung into the fast lane, eating up the tar.

In Sandton City he replaced his stolen possessions with new Adidas trainers, a Scar t-shirt, and a swipe of the GES credit card. Now he is waiting for Max, people-watching, the caffeine lubricating his rusted brain. The yuppies browsing in the Persian-rug market are all

attractive and well-dressed, and even the dreadlocked, rasta-curved waitress takes David's breath away until he is distracted by an enormous set of wobbling breasts encased in a sea-blue GUESS t-shirt.

Sandton City: this is Africa cleansed. Bursting with new-money enthusiasm, every shopper is gorgeous and on their own catwalk; even the cleaning staff are beautiful in their caps and Afrika-patterned uniforms. The coolness here is palpable, the future bubbling up like so much volcanic lava – unstoppable, neither good nor bad, fresh earth, a liquid present.

Here, thinks David as he watches the rich punters, money is the great racial leveller: all shades of melanin throb through the heart of the country's currency circulation, all equally happy to turn to consumption for sanctuary and oblivion. But from here, on the balcony of Illy, their reasons appear different. White punters seem especially eager to appear wealthy. Any sloppiness, poorness or underclass hardness are met with distasteful glances. David, in his t-shirt and jeans, has a vague feeling that people want him out, that he is reminding them too much of the deep poverty just a few hundred metres away, the poverty that their parents perhaps lived in, or lived off, something to arise from or hide from. Either the money is a pearl in your oyster or a Prozac pill that blocks facts, memories, the means of your ill-gotten gains.

Indian shoppers are different – without guilt and without a point to prove, they can concentrate on consumption in its purest form, even making it a family pursuit. But coloured shoppers seem sad. The love-children of the rape of Africa, they have latched most strongly onto the new South African culture and the power of money to purchase that culture, buy back the innocence that was lost at birth with Levis jeans, Hilfiger perfumes, Calvin Klein shirts. An innocent, cleanly-washed shopping experience to sooth the jagged, inflamed edges

of memory, to chain the last albatross of identity to a home island made of large-denomination currency.

But, of all the shades of skin tone, it is the black consumers that are the most enthusiastic. They have the biggest point to prove. Every time they swipe a credit card they are saying: look at me, notice me. I have the power to rise above my circumstances (even the millionaire's sons like to say this). What greater power can there be?

He hears a wolf-whistle behind him. It's Max - his dreads have grown to the size of an angry mane, but otherwise he looks the same: six-six of chiselled ebony wrapped in white Nigerian robes with gold-threaded embroidery. He sits down and orders an espresso. They talk briefly about life: girlfriends, this season's parties, their cars, Joburg versus Cape Town, the ups and downs of the spenders below. But they soon get to business. David, more coherent this time, tells him more about his search for Absalom and his meeting with George. Max nods slowly. David had once signed some legal documents which weren't strictly accurate, and which not only saved Max from prosecution, but earned him a few thousand dollars in compensation. His reward from Max bought him a new interior for his apartment and a summer of assorted booze and drugs for himself and ten of his closest friends.

'Yeah... dat make sense to me. But first I mus' explain... dis fem – R&R - dey own by consulting company. Now dey own by holding company dat partially owned by a cousin of an associate, so I get into dey books, no problem. Now, R&R was founded in eighty-one to represent US companies in South Africa. Some of dese companies supplying ARMSCOR an' Sasol, some were sanctions-busting. Look like dey make plenty money dis way. Now, dey latest client is US construction company call CES: Corporate Engineering Solutions. CES already give now R&R ten million rand advance.'

David nearly chokes on his coffee. Max sips gently, his expression unmoved.

‘So I look again at CES. Now dey operate for World Bank – specialise in big projects in tird world countries: dams, railways, oil-pipelines, eh? Dey have some kind of... informal link to World Bank. So I look at project dey done: dam in Cambodia, oil-pipeline in Chad, more dam in Brazil, Ecuador, Malawi, Burundi, Burma, railway across Colombia. Now... dey work like dis: World Bank convince a country dey are needing, say, hydroelectric dam, as part of “structural adjustment programme”. Dis country den get a loan, say, four hundred million US dollar. Now dey use dis borrowed money to pay CES. When I realise dis I look more, and my suspicion were right: dey also supported by US government agencies.’

‘How did you find all this out?’ asks David, mentally following this trail of cash.

‘CES website, World Bank website, people who know people... in dey organisation. World Bank have offices in Johannesburg, Lagos, London, Washington...’

‘I see, I see. But how does this help me? I still have to find Absalom. That’s still what Simon wants. It just sounds like he’s worth even more money than I thought.’

Max nods depreciatively, shaking his shaggy mane of dreadlocks.

‘David, how you dey tinkin? You musn’ be yeye man dis time...’

Frustrated with his friend’s obliqueness, David gives a bored shrug.

‘Yes?’

Max smiles and sips his coffee, watching an overweight woman in a Ndebele dress inspect a bright Pakistani rug.

‘Like wit all big companies, dere is many opinion about CES. Dey CES website say people tink dey best ting since bread in Somalia. Dey make electricity, school, road, big... compensation package... if dey use up land.’

‘Happy for them.’

‘Eh... happy for dem. But other source tell different story. CES has been accused of corruption in fourteen countries an’ convicted in four. Dey bribe government officials, environmental assessors, clergy, bureaucrats, pretty much everyone. Dese sources accuse CES of destroying dey environment wit unnecessary dams, dey destroy local culture wit Western development, make profit off huge loans taken by countries dat are already poor. We borrow from US only to give back to dey company, den pay back wi’ compound interest. Smartes’ criminals on Eart’. Now, which of all dese stories to believe, I don’ know. Probably a mixture. But eida way, you up against a big contender. You better now start tinkering about you dey plans.’

David eats the sweet foam from the bottom of his cup and watches another group of girls chattering in Afrikaans below.

‘Jy lieg!’ says one with a long pony-tail and a white crop-top.

‘Nee *girlfriend*,’ replies her friend with short blonde curls and a denim skirt, a ringer for Georgina. ‘Ek is erns. Daai jeans kos vier duisend rand!’

‘Het hy dit gekoop?’

‘Sommer so.’

The foam is finished.

‘What options?’

‘For exampo,’ continues Max, also watching the girls, ‘peopo dat opposed CES in oda countries were bribed, treated off, or were victims of “accidents”. Sometimes victims of... unrelated violence, eh?’

‘Jesus. So you think CES killed the Thembekas?’

‘Not necessarily. From what you dey say to me, it also possible dat Mnanzis kill dem. But perhaps CES,’ Max leans back, folds his hands across his stomach, ‘... facilitated... de whole ting.’

‘Shit,’ David leans across the table. ‘Now what?’

‘Eh... now you wait and tink. Dere more money in dis ting dan you can even spend. I couldn’ get CES’s business plan, but I imagine it’ big, maybe for dam or for railway line or for maybe oil. Dey mus’ be doin’... preliminary work. Now, it look like dey already decide to build dere. If it gonna be through da World Bank, dey want da path to be smooth before dey do paperwork at da bank, so dirty-work cannot be traced to dem. Thembeikas were perhaps... a bump in da road.’

David orders a beer from the rasta waitress. Max was right about the drink.

‘So what do they want with Absalom?’ he asks.

‘Who knows, abi? Perhaps dey would rather work wit him dan wit da whole Mnanzi family. Eh... less resistance to dey plans.’

‘Shit. Competition.’

Max stares as a group of long-legged, short-skirted models cross the plaza below. ‘But I don’ tink dat what dey want. Look it dis way: if dey made a deal wit Mnanzi family, dey will want it to go through now. If Absalom arrive some day, claiming da chieftaincy, dey will have... limited options. Dey can take him out, but by den it will cause serious wahala if da opposition start dying. But if dey decide to work wit him, Mnanzis will feel betrayed and... bitter... and might cause even more problem. Dey might sabotage da whole project. I tink Absalom is a mistake. I also tink dey don’t want to work wit him at all. Dey want him dead before dey officially move in, abi?’

David sips his beer, taking in Max's words.

'Do you think Simon knows all this?'

'If he does, he not meant to know. Dis all come from confidential R&R files.'

'He said he heard about development... through the grape-vine.'

'Maybe he just heard a rumour. If he did know more, he should keep it to himself to protect he dey firm from bein' sued by R&R. Dat would also make sense.'

'What do you think his plan is?'

'You would have to ask him. GES will have trouble protecting Absalom if you find him. Perhaps Simon has some kind of plan for a... settlement. Dey pay Absalom say, ten million rand or someting to sign away he dey chieftaincy, GES get half dat. Boom. Easy money. Maybe dey have some oda plan? Who knows what dey game is now?'

Thinking back, Simon had always been cagey about R&R. And he had never said what or how he knew about the development. The sense of unease that David has felt since the beginning of this assignment is being replaced by a more specific fear: that he is in over his head.

'Den,' Max continues, 'I look at R&R's accounts. Dey distributed CES money trough a pyramid of holding companies. Two hundred and fifty tousand in cash was drawn from one of dese, eh?. Oda money has gone to a chief Sangoma, gangsters, ANC bureaucrats and... de Mnanzis.'

'Shit.'

'Yes. *Merde*. Eh... I am guessing dat part of da deal for all dose bribes is absolute secrecy.'

'I need a vodka,' David says, and finishes his beer.

‘You need ten vodkas, my man. We gonna hit Rivonia tonight.’

They order a round of vodkas and discuss David’s options. It seems he still has no choice but to go to Swaziland. As for what to tell Simon, he decides to keep quiet about what he knows. Since Simon seems to be withholding information from him, he sees no reason to tell Simon more than he needs to. David and Max make plans to meet later, at a new R&B club in Rivonia.

‘Later bro, and thanks for the help.’

‘You owe me.’

‘You mean we’re even?’

Max slowly shakes his mane of dreadlocks.

‘OK, if something goes down maybe you’ll get a cut.’

‘Now you talking,’ he says, smiling. ‘Bot remember dude, material tings are means, not an end. Derefore da end is not material. Keep some perspective, eh.’

‘Thanks for the help guru. I’ll take your advice as soon as I’ve sorted out this fucking mess.’

‘Dat advice could help at any time, young Parawan.’

‘Fuck off Max.’

‘Dude.’

Max leaves Anton’s number (he lives nearby, and David has lost all his numbers), grips his hand in a Nigerian handshake, and disappears into the crowd. David is left sitting behind his empty cappucino-cup and beer glasses, pining for a cigarette. He pays the waitress and ambles through the giant shopping centre, window-shopping: Indian rugs, designer haircuts, a titanium crossbow with laser sight, a samurai sword, a diamond-studded

Gucci tie-clip, Cuban cigars, a Gautier store. He buys a 50 Cent CD and settles at another coffee shop on Sandton Square and sits on the outdoor balcony. The Square was perhaps intended to be a kind of piazza, but instead, with its bare, windowless walls and austere yet graceless geometry, it resembles some kind of amateur Greek temple. The overpriced restaurants, cafes and wine-bars that line its edge seem reluctant to be there, as if they are in some kind of joyless prison. At least he is allowed to smoke. He pays the waitress to buy him a packet of cigarettes and drinks cup after cup of black coffee, puffing away, watching the punters drinking in the shade, too scared to cross the open square; whether because of the burning sun or the uncomfortable openness he does not know.

Anton was born on his parents' estate in Surrey. His family made their money by owning, variously, tracts of land in Constantia, Johannesburg's Northern suburbs, the Natal midlands and the Karoo. Anton was raised in public-school London and private-school Johannesburg, studied at King's College and UCT Law School. He attempted to work in a Cape Town law firm, but has now returned to Jozi, where his heart has settled. An old school friend of David's, a comrade-in-arms, Anton of the Trust Fund, Anton of the bisexual fetish addiction, Anton of the drug-induced-psychosis, Anton the lawyer.

David cannot continue his search for Absalom until Monday, when he meets Pius, when he might find some answers. Until then he can only kill time and, as his logic dictates, make the most of being in Joburg for the weekend with a company credit card, a company car, a week of relative de-tox behind him, and away from the prying eyes of Cape Town. He finds a public phone and dials the number that Max had left him.

Anton's unmistakable public-school inflection answers:

‘Good afternoon Mister Barendse, how goes?’

‘Sweet and sour, as usual. And how are you Mister Baker?’

‘Splendid. But I’m splendid every day, so that’s not exactly news. I’m somewhat employed, a little bit in a relationship and... sober from time to time. I strive to find balance in my life.’

‘That’s great Anton. You haven’t changed much, have you?’

Anton lives in Sandton, only a few minutes drive from the shopping centre. The apartment is a Spanish-style semi-detached, defended by twin white poodles, all pom-poms and anxiety. The spiked and electrified gates swing open and David parks in the paved front yard beside a convertible red and white Karmann Ghia. Anton opens the door. His long, doggish face is cleanly shaven and freshly scrubbed; his dark hair is tousled and his smile as bone-dry as usual.

‘Good afternoon, Barnie.’

With a flourish he invites David into his abode. The open-plan spaces are scattered with modern-a-la-nature: wood, leather, stone, coral, glass, feathers, skulls. Anton slumps into a leather construction somewhere between an arm-chair and a bean-bag.

‘So,’ he says, holding up a Budweiser, ‘Wazzuuuup?’

David cannot face repeating his work troubles to a new ear. This search has been weighing on his mind for almost a week, which is well past his usual attention span.

‘Not much,’ he says. ‘Work landed me here yesterday, and I gotta stick around this weekend ‘cos I have to meet someone on Monday again.’

‘Nice. I’m having a dinner party tonight, just a couple of friends. Should be fun.’

‘You going out afterwards?’

‘Dude?’

‘Cool, I’m there.’

Anton makes them some Verbena. David collapses into a couch and they light cigarettes and sip the fragrant tea. It is some time since the two have seen each other, and they must catch up on the events of the past year. After a brief stint as an articled clerk in Cape Town, Anton gave up on the notion of employment, bought and equipped a Landrover, and spent six months driving to Cairo with Wayne. They took the less travelled route, through the Congo, the Central African Republic, Chad and Libya. Not the tourist-route through Kenya and Tanzania photographed by travel writers with short beards and long pretensions. This, Anton says, was jungle, mud-tracks, villagers armed to the teeth with pangas and AKs, death threats from roving banditos. It made him feel, for the first time since he exited rehab, alive and kicking.

Averting a digression into darker territory, David asks about his romantic life. Anton’s current Joburg mistress, Kelly, is coming to the dinner party. Kelly the Neve-Cambell-lookalike, Kelly of the part-time nymphomania, Kelly of the Jewish fixation (she had converted at the age of sixteen to improve her chances of finding a Jewish husband). She took drama classes at WITS to make herself more mysterious and culturally certifiable; she was even FHM’s ‘student of the month’ last October. As for her silicone breasts, collagen lips, and liposuctioned waist (which a previous boyfriend, a plastic surgeon twenty-seven years her senior, paid for), Anton doesn’t mind. In fact he finds it quite a turn on, quite S&M, quite Manga.

David tries to recount his life of the past year, but it quickly gets complicated. They last spoke at their graduation, after which Anton immediately left to pursue opium in Macau.

David remained in Cape Town for a summer of unwavering dedication to the cause of hedonism that lasted from November until his articles at GES began in February. It was then (barely two weeks before colliding with Angeline in the heat-haze of Clifton) that he met Georgina on a Thursday night at Purgatory. She was alone at the bar, twirling the olive in her martini, sitting cross-legged in a short vermillion dress that sparkled under the bar-lights. Her friends had gone off to the toilets and she had remained to hold the fort. David left his table of beer-drunk lawyers and clerks and leaned against the bar beside her. He ordered a martini – and that was his opening line, a conversation about cocktails. Yet the pair recognised the dull thud and razor cut in each others' eyes and it was not long before Georgina had joined his table and was already flirting with his friends while whispering dirty secrets into his ear. In time he learned the real secrets of Georgina: her anorexia at Herschel, her frustration with her conservative Anglican parents, her despair at the drudgery of student life (she dropped out after one year of Fine Arts). How, when she was sixteen, she was spotted by an agent while on acid in Greenmarket square and since then has lived between New York, Milan, Cologne and Cape Town; the liberation she finally achieved only banged the last nail into the wholesome coffin of her parents' hopes. How, like David, beneath all this froth of energy, in the basement of her existence, there lurked a dark soul that wanted to find another human being, that wanted to emerge from the shadow of her massive cynicism and live like a child again. So, like two dark roses growing in cracks of a basement floor, the two intertwined and searched for light together.

For a year they grew closer, until the thought of Angeline was driven from his mind. But the beginning of the end (he has not yet reached the end of the end) came one hot January afternoon, nearly a year later, after another season of Capetonian abuse. Georgina suddenly

became certain that he was having an affair with Angeline. Of course it did not help when, one hot summer afternoon, drunk on White Russians, cigarettes, and mushrooms, he had walked onto Georgina's shoot on Oudekraal beach. Flocks of models were milling around the heat-soaked boulders and icy waters, the Cape Town sun shining as clear as Absolut in a tumbler. Georgina was posed beside a wave-smoothed boulder, wearing a polka-dotted bikini which hid almost no flesh, holding a beach ball and a smile. David stumbled towards her and pulled her into inaccurate kisses, telling the lighting people and make-up people and grips and Klingons to piss off, this is *his* girlfriend. She squirmed like an eel, which he liked, but he surfaced from their kiss to see Angeline through his booze haze, her camera dropped like a curtain. At first he thought it was just another hallucination, then it rushed to him: she must have graduated from her photography degree at PE tech... taken a job in Cape Town... a fashion photographer...

Without a word he turned and walked up to her, slow steps. Her face was as crisp and perfect as that afternoon on Fourth Beach almost a full year before, and again he met the familiar stare, the brittle eyes, the impervious beauty, the saccharine emotions. He leaned forward to kiss her and she did not resist, but he was helpless; before all the models and hopefuls and druggies she drew him in with her mulatto touch and the smell of aloes under the Eastern Cape sun. He had to pretend to shrug her off, had to pretend to be appalled, repulsed. But he hesitated too long. Far too long. Now Angeline thinks he's a weakling and Georgina thinks their unspoken promise is broken. Now Georgina is only with him in the loosest sense and he is tired of the games she plays with other men, games where he must rise to the challenge. The other girls he has slept with (Inge, Nazneem, Beatrice, Charmaine, Patrice, others he doesn't remember) have been of no help. The pain is no longer sweet, he

wants all or nothing. Which will it be when he returns? He does not know. He and Angeline should simply have had an affair.

Anton nods sympathetically. 'Yep. You gotta maintain in those situations. Sooner or later Georgina will chill, Angeline will chill, then they'll both come crawling back. Just wait and see.'

'I'll still have to choose between them.'

'You must love one more than the other?'

'I don't know. I love *being* with Georgina, she's awesome, every day is cool, she keeps me entertained, she outplays me all the time... but I don't need to be with Angeline to love her, like she's woven into my DNA or something. I don't know. Perhaps I need a third option.'

'Yeah – both. Or neither. Or perhaps there's another girl out there, waiting for you. Patrice sounds pretty supple.'

David ignores his last remark and sips his tea in silent contemplation. At length he continues: 'Maybe. Maybe its just too much partying.'

'Well... is there really such a thing?' says Anton, and gets up to make another cup of tea.

'Yes, Anton, there is.'

Anton sniffs the steam rising from the pot of Verbena. 'Ag David,' he moans, slipping into a thick Joburg accent, 'I hope that doesn't mean you're not gonna party so hard anymore?'

'Well... I am in Joburg. How much damage could I possibly do?'

They watch cricket and drink a dozen Zambezi lagers that Anton brought back from the houseboat on Kariba. The Indian team is touring South Africa - Tendulkar smashes his way to a century while the rest of his team fall, succumbing to the speed of Ntini and Pollock, the cunning of Kallis, the sheer guts of Nel. The beer, the cricket and the afternoon sun slanting into the room send David into a half-sleep. He staggers up to the guest room on the first floor and passes out on top of the sheets, too tired to remove his clothes and barely too drunk to care.

He wakes to see, through his bedroom window, the sun setting over the suburbs. A flock of hadidas fly past in the dying light, croaking mournfully. Under a hot shower he nurses his tender ribs, his bruised cheek, his residual hangover. Refreshed, he dons Sven's suit again, this time without a tie and with his shirt hanging free.

The flat seems empty, but in a corner of the lounge he sees a spiral staircase ascending towards the ceiling. He climbs up and emerges onto a roof garden of gravel, cacti, and stone sculptures, on which a slightly rusted wrought-iron table is set for dinner, a driftwood bar is lined with bottles of spirits, and two wrought-iron deck-chairs face the setting sun. In one of these lies Anton, stretched out, savouring a whiskey. A single cactus is bearing a single yellow flower, like a miniature sun in its sculptured desert.

David pours himself a whiskey and settles into the other deck-chair. The roof looks south towards the architectural horror of Sandton City, and to the east faces the squalid hovels of Alexandra, the home of the Impoverished Majority. To the west lie the undulating Northern Suburbs, ripe with money, above which the sun is setting blood-red and wavering behind thick pollution. Swifts and swallows swarm above. Anton finishes his drink and

disappears down the spiral stairs to prepare dinner. David remains until the last remnants of light fade.

In the lounge a waltz is playing on the hi-fi, while in the open-plan kitchen Anton is busy preparing dinner.

David dumps himself on a couch and watches MTV on mute.

‘So who’s coming tonight?’ he asks.

Carefully stuffing a tray of zucchini flowers with peppered and herbed ricotta, Anton gives David a crash-course on his guests. The ubiquitous Kelly. Then Wayne, a trust-funder and Anton’s chief partner-in-crime. Wayne lives alone on an island in the Okavango delta, where the great rivers of the Central African plateau finally sink into the shifting sands of the Kalahari. Surrounded first by a hundred kilometres of impenetrable swamp and then the Kalahari desert, Wayne feels safe, at peace. There he spends his days sitting in the shade of a Kameeldoorn tree, his laptop connected by satellite to Wall Street, Diagonal Street, the Nikkei, Hang Sen, CAC100. Every evening he savours the glory of a sunset devoid of any human artifice, marsh-birds circling through the explosion of evening colour. From time to time he pilots his Cessna to Joburg for the weekend to see human faces and spend some of his soft-earned money.

Then there’s Gugu, who Anton knows from The Scene. A crazy Zulu, a great-great-grandson of Dingiswayo himself. He bashed and sprinted his way into the Michaelhouse first rugby team, was contracted by the Natal Sharks, and even played Springbok rugby for a season, hailed as the new winger that the country had needed for so long. But temptation flared its nostrils and before the year was over Gugu had been offered \$2.5 to join the Yankee Rednecks in Milwaukee, and couldn’t refuse. Now he’s a professional American footballer,

but temporarily on holiday while recovering from a damaged knee-ligament, one of the few body-parts exposed through his suit of plastic armour. He's locked on being a *Baller*, an image the local talent surely appreciate, and is apparently squandering his money as quickly as he earns it. With him is his current flame, Chantelle, a Durbanite ramp model who's as mentally flimsy as she is physically perfect.

Lastly two girls, Ayesha and Gayathrie. Ayesha worked in Anton's old Cape Town law firm. She keeps him amused with her uptight morals, her high-brow quips, her voluptuous smile, the conservative clothes she wears over her small but indecently proportioned body. Gayathrie, a Joburg Indian of Zambian descent, is a friend of Ayesha whom Anton barely knows, but, he says with a wink, is cute as a button. He carefully marinates strips of mango in a chilli salsa, smiling to himself.

Night deepens and the heat of the day finally dissipates. David watches MTV while Anton applies the finishing touches to four saffron quail, carefully arranging tiny eggs around the birds before scattering a final layer of yellow powder over the arrangement, which, he tells David, will emerge from the oven burnt to a crisp gold, a royal meal. Anton checks his watch and slides the trays of quail and zucchini flowers into the oven. Minutes later the bell rings. At the door is Wayne, solidly built and almost six feet tall, and wearing Bermudas, sandals, and a white silk shirt. His sandy-brown hair flops forward into a handsome face, sun-browned but not rugged, with a square jaw and shocking blue eyes.

'Howzit howzit,' he says and claps each in turn into an African handshake. Anton brings them some beers and returns to the kitchen, where he commences crushing ice, sugar and fresh mint in a ceramic pestle and mortar. Wayne sips his beer. His gaze has no particular direction; he seems to be laughing at some inner weakness of David's. But David

knows this trick. He smiles back and toasts Anton and his cooking abilities. Wayne turns off the Strauss and turns up MTV. They comment on the outfit co-ordination of the fly-girls in the latest R Kelly video in which he prays to The Lord to forgive him since he has repented (during which Wayne also confesses that he has just snorted Ritalin), then debate the merits of J-Lo's ass compared to those of Beyoncé and Christina. David thinks Nora Jones is sexy, and Wayne calls him a pervert. As they are listing the greatest asses of all time, a kind of buttocks hall of fame, the doorbell rings again.

Gugu and Chantelle arrive in a barrage of greetings. Gugu is a tower of black muscle clothed in ivory linen. He smiles vacantly, although a threat is always implicit because of his sheer bulk. Chantelle's caramel hair falls over a creamy back, delicate shoulders, a gravity-defying bosom. An elegant gown, like a caressing pair of hands, cups her breasts and is held up by delicate straps over her shoulders and across her back. The image is shattered, however, when she speaks: a nasal, colloquial whine. Ruff, tuff an' from the Bluff she is.

Anton brings the couple a whiskey and a spritzer and they join Wayne and David in their discussion of the various merits of real versus fake breasts (it is clear that all are referring, implicitly, to Chantelle's works of art). It emerges that Gugu knows Lebo, who is quite a legend on the Jozi party circuit, and he spends some time updating David on his latest night-life antics, his fast cars, his women, the huge shipments from Angola that he buys at cost.

Next to arrive are Ayesha and Gayathrie. Ayesha's large Malay eyes, brushed with shadow, cast a sensuous gaze in strong contrast to her plaid knee-length skirt, her tightly buttoned shirt, her functional pumps. Her hair is pulled back in a simple pony-tail, and nothing about her suggests sex. Yet something indefinable whispers just the opposite: that

beneath the zips and rows of buttons lie the answers to every sexual prayer. With an effort David drags his attention from Ayesha and greets Gayathrie – pretty, petite and dark-skinned, with disproportionately large breasts, permanently arched eyebrows above eyes that sparkle with an innocent sense of humour. Her hair reaches her waist in a loose plait and her soft features are animated in a friendly smile. David immediately takes a liking to her – she is easier to talk to than Ayesha, who’s sensual presence renders him gibbering or speechless.

Kelly arrives amidst the rising hubbub of slightly drunk voices. Anton introduces her – he was right about the Neve Campbell look-alike, although Kelly seems slightly taller, darker, and more regal, as if she had just spent a weekend at a coastal health spa. She flashes a quick smile at David, who can do nothing but smile stupidly in response.

Anton tosses a bowl of vegetables into a steaming wok of ginger tea - the scents of ginger and lemongrass fill the flat - and leads his guests up the spiral stairs, where the table is now set with bottles of Sauvignon Blanc and plates of smoked salmon rolled around cream cheese, avocado and slices of lemon. The night is clear and windless; lit by a crescent moon and dozens of candles, Anton makes a toast to wide open spaces, and they attack the wine and salmon with gusto. In David’s private heart a splinter hurts and he misses a loved one, but he is not sure which.

Anton and Kelly clear the remains of the salmon and return with bottles of red wine, a heap of ostrich fillet and trays of roast quail, zucchini flowers and steamed vegetables. David is seated between Anton and Ayesha. When Ayesha discovers that David is a lawyer she begins a barrage of questions: Which firm do you work for? Yes, I’ve heard of them... What kind of work do you do? Is there growth in that area? Do they pay you properly? No, of

course not... What are your plans once you've passed your board exams? You don't know? How can you not know? I want to make partner by the time I'm thirty, I don't care what I have to do. I know I can do it...

Gayathrie comes to his rescue with an enthusiastic discussion about which kind of fillet is best: beef, ostrich, Kudu, Springbok, horse or wild boar. David argues for the supremacy of beef, which has been specially bred for its tenderness. Gayathrie likes the weight and spice of venison, of which Kudu is the best, but she hardly ever eats it out of fear for the endangered beasts. Ayesha, distracted from a conversation with Wayne over the volatility of the rand, adds that Springbok has the most subtle, most sublime taste, and Chantelle agrees. Gugu, Kelly and Anton all vote for ostrich, the miracle red meat. Wayne says he has tasted kangaroo, which is superior to all other meats.

After a week of living off Steers, pies and beer (mostly beer), the meal seems heaven-sent, and David doesn't care whether the fillet is penguin or parakeet, as long as it's soft and juicy. The wine, too, floods his cortex in a way that lager can't and he soon feels rich and glowing.

Ayesha and Anton start a heated debate about musical taste – Anton insists that Ayesha doesn't have any. Ayesha is content to listen to bubblegum pop on the radio. She likes boy-bands (which David interprets as: they put me in the mood for love). Wayne, like David, has a taste for the classics of rock 'n roll: Bowie, The Kinks, Eric Clapton, The Clash, as well as a touch of the classical when he's feeling whimsical. He would rather be impaled through the head with a rusty spike than listen to a boy-band. Ayesha insists that this reaction implies that he has some undiscovered homosexual tendencies (lesbian lovers ripping off those buttons, which bounce on the floor like scattered... ). Wayne laughs: no, he has

already discovered his homosexual tendencies and, as she has suggested, perhaps it is Ayesha that has such... tendencies. This pushes the whole table, increasingly drunk, into an uproar over what musical preferences indicate about sexual orientation. David empties the last bottle of Shiraz into his glass. The only CDs he has in his car are Creedence Platinum I and II, The Dark Side of the Moon, the Marshall Mathers CD, Fifty Cent, the Best of Cream, Methodman and Redman and Savuka, all of which he has heard a million times. This list starts a slurred argument over Pink Floyd. Ayesha insists that Western psychedelia can never be truly free of Western rationalism, and thus Pink Floyd is doomed from the start. Wayne replies that she needs a good roger, and David must restrain Ayesha from trying to slap him. Gugu lets out a grunt and loads another steak onto his plate. Chantelle smiles vacantly and pushes her zucchini flower in circles around her plate.

Anton disappears downstairs and soon The Velvet Underground is blasting from the room below. Ayesha rolls her eyes, but Gayathrie starts to roll her shoulders, whatever the old junkie might be muttering. Kelly carries the remaining trays of food down and returns with dessert: the marinated mango strips topped with the crushed mint-ice and a loaded platter of cheeses, chutney and halved ripe figs. Anton brings up four bottles of Moët and Chandon '97 and a grin. He uncorks the first bottle, pours and downs a glass of bubbly. He sits down and pours another glass of champagne, lights a cigarette. Everyone else is tucking into the dessert, savouring the contrast between the sweet, hot mango and the minted ice, both Sandton City and Alex temporarily forgotten.

The night cools. The food is gone and only empty bottles of wine and champagne remain on the table. They strike up cigarettes, sip at nearly empty glasses, and talk expansively about their lives, embellishing, dramatizing, comfortably drunk. Anton seems to

embody a silent group consensus when he dials a number on his mobile and moves to the edge of the roof and leans back against the railing.

‘Yes... no...’ he says into his phone, counting his guests with an index finger.

‘How about we buy ten and get one free? Yes? Half an hour? Fine.’

Kelly and Chantelle descend the staircase and return with Port and cigars which the men puff into the open air while discussing matters of great importance, such as the competition between German and American porn, the declining quality of page three girls, and the recent success of the South African cricket team. The girls retreat to the lounge and discuss woman-things: make-up, men, money.

Half an hour later the doorbell rings. Everyone runs to the edge of the roof and waves and shouts at the car entering the driveway below, a blue Opel Kadett. A scrawny boy steps out; he looks barely sixteen, with acne-scarred skin, oversized clothes and a Mets baseball cap. He gives the peace sign to his gallery and makes his way to the roof.

Anton introduces Big.

‘He’s Big in Sandton,’ he mumbles the feeble pun. Big sits at the table and Kelly pours him a flute of champagne. They make small talk: complaints about police harassment, the quality of the pure-grade Colombian passing through African shores these days, the narcotic status of Lou Reed in the seventies. His champagne finished, Big opens a briefcase full of tiny balls of plastic and tosses eleven onto the table. Anton hands him a wad of money, which Big doesn’t count, but sticks quickly into a pocket in his baggy jeans. Big’s phone rings and he moves to the edge of the roof.

‘Duty calls guys, gotta go. Enjoy,’ he says.

‘Thanks dude. You know I will,’ replies Anton, a dry grin re-shaping his face.

They show Big out and adjourn to the coffee table in the lounge, where Kelly has balanced a frameless mirror. Gugu whips out an Amex platinum card and knocks it absently against the reflection of the ceiling and it occurs to David that it has been hours since he thought about where Absalom might be, why he might be hiding, who might want to kill him, what Simon knows, whether he is at risk. Right now, *tap tap*, these questions hold no meaning for him.

University of Cape Town

## Chapter 8--JOZI

Twenty minutes later Chantelle emerges from the toilet and into the bubble of rapid conversation taking place in the lounge, her pupils like pinpricks, her movements all jolts and twitches. Gugu follows shortly after, gripping a bottle of wine by the neck and burping. The mirror has already seen off two grams, and they blow another two with grim determination before scattering to collect bags, phones, drugs, money, protection, keys, tissues. Kelly is jabbering to an uninterested Wayne that last time she was at the Melrose she saw a Bentley, two Lamborghinis, a Ferrari, and more Porsches than she could count, and a lovely Jewish plastic surgeon asked her for anal sex in his suite but she turned him down because, really, that was taking things a little too fast, but she did keep his number and he may be there tonight, but please not to tell Anton, who is obscenely rich but, after all, not Jewish. Wayne responds by wiping his nose and nodding silently, hoping it's the proper response to a monologue he has spontaneously ignored.

They put any open bottles of wine to their lips and drain them, finish lit cigarettes in one long pull, and tumble down towards the cars. Gugu and Chantelle drive his obese Mercedes and Wayne, Ayesha and Gayathrie take Wayne's Range Rover. David, Anton and Kelly jump into the Karmann Ghia where, careering South down the M1, the cool wind plays with their hair under the open night sky. David and Kelly tilt their heads back, looking at the

crescent moon and the handful of stars that are visible through Joburg's shroud, while Anton drives with the pedal to the floor, the seventy-six VW engine roaring like an angry bear.

The doorman at the hotel recognises Anton, Wayne and Gugu with a small bow, and the rest automatically follow. They push their way through gentle afro-galactic jazz, low-lights, burgundy carpets, low-flying chandeliers, throngs of models and dumpling lecherous businessmen, gaggles of television starlets, teams of Kwaito rockers looking for an unknown quantity, armies of Nigerians, envoys, ambassadors, politicians, delegates, representatives, general hang-abouters. They arrange themselves around a marble bar-counter and order two bottles of Krug '98, an assortment of cocktails and a round of tequilas to kick them off. Anton is half-heartedly waving at a gang of soap-stars (*Generations* and *Isidingo*) quaffing champagne in a corner; Kelly is eyeing him suspiciously, the other eye on the lookout for Semitic features that bear signs of inestimable wealth. A cute, wide-eyed doe of a woman winks at Anton while Kelly is not looking and he downs his tequila, slams the glass on the table, and disappears to the toilet to make some headway into his next gram. Seconds later the cast member across the room rises unsteadily to her feet.

Ayesha, gingerly sipping her Harvey Wallbanger, is unimpressed with the grand efforts of the venue to bestow a sense of glamour, worldliness, grace and style, with the froth of effort working against, rather than for these causes. A round of disbelieving exclamations follow this opinion – no, in fact this is the most stylish, most celebrity-haunted, most money-laden bar in the country. Ayesha just arches her perfect eyebrows, 'Give me a sunset at Caprice any day.'

'Ag,' moans Wayne, 'You Capetonians are such narcissists. Just like to look at the sea all day long, forget about... reality. Get with the programme...'

‘Just because,’ Ayesha interrupts, swaying slightly, ‘we are not driven insane by a lack of beauty, doesn’t mean we’re out of touch. We don’t need this try-hard, please-everyone, bling-bling story. You think enough overpaid wankers in a room can compensate for an ocean breeze, palm trees, fresh water, sand under your feet...’

‘Not to mention a kilometre-high chunk of sandstone outside your front door,’ adds David, as an afterthought, ‘A billion trillion tons of rock, at least.’

Anton lights a cigar and through the pall of smoke suggests, ‘Capetonians are such hippies.’

‘You guys are just jealous,’ offers Gayathrie, looking around innocently, smiling or smirking.

‘Not really,’ continues Anton. ‘Jozi isn’t just a place, it’s a state of mind.’

‘That’s great, Anton.’ says Ayesha, staring around the room down the bridge of her nose. ‘A state of mind. What kind of state is that?’

‘It’s a disposition... a disposition to react in a certain way... no-one knows what it is, because we are not... gods. But it’s certainly there.’

‘Anton,’ says Wayne, ‘you’re getting esoteric on us. Have some joint to sort yourself out.’

‘Yeah... what the fuck am I rambling about?’

*Georgina loves this place*, thinks David. They had come here last year on an amphetamine-fuelled weekend in Jozi to test her new MG on the N1. After Georgina had been asked for the third time whether she was Charlize Theron she bit the bullet and dragged David into a toilet cubicle with a Russian porn star she had befriended and...

Gayathrie is snapping her fingers between his eyes.

‘David, David... ground control to Major David, are you with us?’

‘Yeah yeah yeah, just, you know...’

Gugu and Chantelle disappear and are later seen racing flaming Absinthe Lamborghinis with a contingent of the West Indian cricket team. Wayne has his eye on a girl across the room. Through David’s sharpened, bubble-gummed coke-vision, he sees an athletic Italian with brown ringlets cascading down her back and vermilion lips flicking at a succession of Martinis, sitting at a table of what look like Swiss mafia financiers. In fact, Wayne informs him, she is Maltese and lives above a four thousand year old temple on her lonely outpost island, where she spends her siesta hours reading Kierkegaard. She is part of the reason he is here, one of the few rewards great enough to coax him from his sixteen-acre paradise, his personal Eve. David is overwhelmed by a sudden desire to be alone at the Disa Park pool, swimming in Table Mountain’s waters under the huddle of trees, watching the lizards sun themselves on the sandstone boulders, free of toxins, legal demands, urban creep.

Anton, after a brief interlocution with the maitre-de, secures them a table, and after a succession of card tricks and disappearing coins they are leaning in their chairs, surrounded by Mdu, half of Bongo Maffin, Chris Rock (who’s hanging in Gayathrie’s space like a horny shadow), and Jay Kay, who is so stoned he thinks the tricks are real and swears loudly to the table that shit, shit, he... um, gatta go do something...

David slips off to the bar, an electric buzz in his head. He balances on his stool and orders a white Russian and realises, curiously, that Patrice is seated to his left, fixing him with a radiant smile.

‘That’s why they call me Slim Danie,’ he greets her, ‘I’m back.’

She giggles, nearly spilling her Martini.

After a complex conversation during which David only remembers the last few words spoken and thus, he suspects, a high degree of repetition, Patrice glances over her shoulder, where a tiny, white-haired man is talking loudly at a team of Chinese envoys, 'Tonight, baby, sorry.'

*Fuck.*

She disappears, her whore's ass swaying to the gentle Afrogalactic jazz. He takes his white Russian back to the table where he leans carefully, pretending to listen to the noise.

Time fast-forwards frame by frame but stops dead after a watershed round of tequila slammers. The room is swaying in time to protesting stomachs. They shout slurred farewells to their new friends - Gayathrie is now sitting on Jay Kay's lap, listening to his life story, Ayesha is trying to stop Chris Rock from snogging her, Wayne is discussing Dennett with the Italian Job; David, Anton, and Gugu are discussing the extent to which being ambidextrous could help a porn-star's career. 'It's amazing', says a short film producer who has joined their table, 'how much porn is made in South Africa, how much is exported.'

Under the table, Chantelle's hand comes gently to rest on David's leg. He makes no response, other than a darting look into her eyes, which is like looking down the apertures of two tequila bottles. Her hand feels hot and Gugu suddenly looks offensively large. He slides her hand up his thigh, pretending to listen to the miniature porn-producer. David is burning, he feels released from gravity, finally properly drunk, away from the noose of small-town friends, with twenty-four hours to recover from whatever he does. The room has taken on a tint of red. They all stumble from the bar, Chantelle leaving the table with a squeeze of David's erection, and back into the Karmann Ghia, where Anton grabs a handful of ice-blue

pills from the cubby hole and hands them out like candy. Wayne for undisclosed reasons refuses to drive, so he squashes into the battle-ship of a Mercedes with Gugu, Chantelle, Ayesha and Gayathrie. Gugu shows him the two Uzzis he keeps under the front seats ('Just in case, you know') and they all knock back two icy-whites and drive into the night, headed for the Base Line jazz club.

The city centre spreads before them as they speed down the M1 towards Melville. A quarter of South Africa's population, the largest city in Africa South of Cairo, a place twelve million people call home, whether they live in a cardboard box in a tepid field of shacks or a mansion under Randburg's private moon. How many of them, thinks David, are getting fucked on a Saturday night to ease the pain of the week, to slow the passage of time that a working life speeds up? The city's skyline, staggered with towers and dotted by late-night office-lights, looms before them; the night wind whips their hair, other cars fall by their side like golf-carts. Anton, although intensely focussed on his driving experience, is talking incessantly. David is suddenly sweating lightly and feeling awfully good while Kelly smiles insanely in the back seat, her hands on David's neck. David pretends to listen to Anton while curling the night-wind over his extended hand like a cold flame. On a whim he tunes into Anton's soliloquy, which turns out to be about the time he caught a burglar in his house (Kelly had locked herself in the closet, hiding, shaking) whom he shot through the stomach with his R5 rifle and then carried to hospital, his blue guts falling from his abdomen, smelling of shit.

'That's what happens,' he says, turning his head slowly, both eyes still on the road, 'when you try to steal what's mine.'

Kelly's hands slide from David's neck.

‘I saved that fucker’s life,’ says Anton, giving David a sly wink. He had forgotten how difficult this bastard could be.

By the time they reach Melville’s main drag the new drugs are kicking in; hands are clenching, teeth are grinding, beads of sweat are popping up, surprised. But the troop keeps calm, positive, as they disengage from the cars and meander, gently, down the streets of Melville; the pavement feels soft, the air tinged with pink. The main drag is cramped between old Melville houses, lined with cafes and galleries and shops that sell candles (how many ornamental candles does Joburg need, exactly?). They jostle through an assorted crowd: yuppies in chinos, winos in dungarees, Angolans in Armani, drag queens in full song, dogs in heat, children on glue, pubescents on amphetamines, raindrops on roses. Anton and David prevent the group from disintegrating into different mental states and different directions and they make it to the Base Line in one piece. The heavy wooden doorway is hung with red velvet and from inside come scents of cigar smoke and varnished wood. The bouncer pulls apart the drapes and they enter, glowing and jangling.

Inside, the club is dark, quiet, scattered with Victorian divans and velvet-lined armchairs, the sparse crowd watching a crew set up the sound. Ambient street-noise intrudes on the dry hiss of burning cigars, the clink and sip of whiskey drinkers, the click and buzz of amplifiers. The lights dim. Smells of carpets, ash and cologne. They recline in divans around an Edwardian card-table.

‘This is my baby,’ whispers Anton into David’s ear.

The band walk onto the stage: a double-bassist, a drummer, and a guitarist carrying a semi-acoustic Gibson. They adjust their instruments with the care of parents at a bris and a hush falls over the room. Even the cigars seem to stop burning.

The lights dim and a tall, elegant figure emerges from backstage, wearing an ankle-length black dress that seems to be both backless and frontless - the top is no more than two strips of velvet looped over her paper-white shoulders to hide the nipples on her small, pointed breasts. She lingers at the microphone as if it is seducing her; she is hesitant.

The double bassist starts up a rolling, thumping rhythm that cries *Urban Africa*. The drummer starts up a bass drum and a high-hat, into which the guitar strums and reverbs like a cold shiver. A spotlight falls onto Inge, the singer, making her skin appear pearly white. Her long black hair, cut square around her high forehead, shines under the sodium lights, framing a taut, flesh-white face. On the border between beautiful and odd, her large eyes are widely set and protrude slightly, her lips are two smears of daiquiri, a short, sharp nose like a paring knife. Her first syllable, a long, low, groaning *uuuuuoh*, fills every space, pushes against every surface. She sings of lost love, her voice sometimes low and throbbing, sometimes soaring three octaves to a tremulous wail. Anton lights a cigar, adding to the pall of smoke.

‘Told you she was good,’ he whispers in David’s ear.

She sings of a love lost to money – of two lovers who inherited a fortune and then no longer needed to share a bathroom (each had their own), or a lounge (he retired to his study, she to her studio), or a kitchen (the cook prepared dinner), or a garden, a balcony, a car, a radio, a life. Once they were one, now each pursued their own desires to their own ends. They became self-interested, isolated, and ended up frozen, alone.

The band pauses to admiring applause and Inge mops atoms of perspiration from her brow. The final song is introduced by her unaccompanied voice and the band join only after the first verse. She sings of bright lights on the horizon of her Free State farm, descending in the direction of a neighbouring farm, the home of her loved one. She sings of the lights

roaring white again and disappearing into the sky, of the dreams that have plagued her since – of the green glow, the insect-eyes, the thin, probing hands. Of her lover, locked in suspended animation while the years unfold on Earth, doomed to a thousand years of hibernation while they return to their home planet, alone in his frozen metal cage. But she sings that she can reach him through the emptiness and the cold; when she sings he can hear her, because there are forces beyond time and space; trapped in the ice, he can hear her. She ends the show with a long, shattering howl, and a space-ship descends from the eaves into her arms. She opens the roof and takes out an astronaut action-figure and cradles him to her bosom. The lights cut and the audience stand and give ceaseless applause. Inge is gone.

Kelly is crying and everyone else seems numb, overwhelmed. David feels constricted and light, like a balloon twisted by a clown, out of shape, alternating between emptiness and points of irretrievable entanglement. Anton, alone in his desire and capacity to move, herds them all backstage, where he locks Inge in a hug. All around her a crowd presses, wanting to touch what had lifted them so high.

‘You were fantastic, as always,’ says Anton.

‘Thanks,’ says Inge, her voice low and soft.

‘You ready for The Valve?’

‘Absolutely baby.’

‘Excellent.’

Inge joins them in the Karmann Ghia, cuddling in the front with Anton. David shares the back seat with Kelly, their pupils dilated, everything appearing warm and yellow, the back seat like a cocoon despite the open sky. They pass the monolithic Wits campus, where Kelly

is a student, and she babbles ceaselessly about her career as an actress, of which David is temporarily not supremely sceptical. He listens while she talks on about her deepest ambitions: to marry a rich Jewish doctor and have a house in Houghton with a pool and two Great Danes, who are noble dogs. She says that every girl can have her dream, and that this is her dream, and she will do anything to have it. That's why she converted when she was sixteen: the Jews are a proud people, financially stable, they look after each other. With a Jewish husband you know you'll never suffer; you can have a large family and he'll never complain, you'll never have to work, you'll meet all the wonderful people in the community when you go to shul or on Jewish holidays, like Pesach. Plus they are very rich and drive the best cars: Mercs, Beamers, Porches...

Behind Anton's seat the pair are rubbing each other's sweating palms. Kelly's ashen eyes focus on David.

'And you?' she asks. 'You're always just too cool for school. You never talk about yourself. What do you want? What are your dreams?'

The answer that has always seemed clear to him (sex, money, cocktails, a rush of experience in every form to beat the great relentless metronome of time) now seems tired, confused, self-defeating. He mumbles: 'I want... a job away from all this... greed, this... back-stabbing. I want to... my... effect on the world must be... good, helpful, so that I...' he mumbles into silence. 'Maybe I also want to feel... close to someone, trust someone. Again.'

Kelly nods sympathetically, feigning understanding. Anton passes around a packet of mushrooms that Wayne personally picked when he spent six months living off the land and evading Parks Board troopers in the Drakensberg. David squeezes Kelly's palm and

whispers, 'later,' into her ear. They each grab a handful of fungus and try to bolt it down quickly, before the nauseating taste (it has been compared to dried vomit, gangrene, hyena-breath, dog-turd) gets too much. The body rebels at every stage when presented with such potent poison: the gag reflex, the heaving stomach, the shrieking taste buds. But you must break through this rebellion to find liberation. Tonight their expedition is what Wayne calls *extreme mushrooming* – being on wild hallucinogenics in the most unlikely places you can find, as far from comforting nature as possible: a wedding, a fetish basement, a tourist bus, an old-age home, hospitals, funerals, crack-dens. Tonight liberation will take place in the city's newest R&B club, where the skin-tones are as mixed-up as the cocktails, where glitter-balls and MTV postures wade through an atmosphere dense with money and possibility. New Africa, New World. Hardship a thing of the past, these young nymphs are the lotus eaters of the future.

By Wayne's cunning design, by the time they have rushed back up the M1 and found parking in a packed Rivonia boulevard, the poison has flooded their bloodstream and they walk into The Valve swaying, over-stimulated, feverish, hot, bothered. The people, the walls, the red carpet, the caramel-and-white striped hot-pants, the gold-glittering bikini-tops, the golden Mascara on night-black skin, the beads of sweat on the chests of waves of throbbing dancers under the low, sweat-drenched ceilings, the throng of skin shades like variegated plane-tree leaves on a late autumn afternoon, all are heaving, breathing, in time to the thump of deep bass and spinning synth, smelling of sweat and champagne bubbles.

David feels a sudden overpowering urge to crap and he rushes to the toilet, pushing through the crowds and a long collapsing corridor and falls onto the porcelain only to be overcome by paranoia and a peak of free-floating anxiety which inhibits his digestive

function so he feels a sudden inability to crap, which only makes him more paranoid. Eventually he must appeal to his Star-Wars knowledge where Obe-Wan says: 'You are losing control of the force, David. Calm yourself, let the force flow through you.' This advice brings him back to the toilet cubicle and a fascination with the quality of its granite basins, the fine lines and explosions of colour.

After five minutes or five hours curled up and sweating on the piss-drizzled floor the nausea recedes and he feels lite as a dove, as a bird, his chest lifting, flying around the room, his body attached like a puppet, his minute eyes scanning the smallest line in the concrete, the tiniest hair. He re-assembles himself – *right, to the dance floor*

Back down the corridor, but this time the passage is ballooning, kaleidoscopic, telescopic, audiosonic, microtelescopic, smellsonic, beatsonic in time with his body and his sense of direction. He reaches the verge of the packed room and is briefly torn between a poignant desire to be in a rock-pool in the Cedarberg and to be right here, right now, surging in the ocean-swell of sweating, barely-clad, pulsating dancers. But the question lasts only seconds and he is soon bouncing his way towards the bar, pushing through the crowd, trying to ignore the magnified, alien faces, entertaining another brief thought over where the others might be.

The drugs are taking hold, faces zoom in and shoot up a barrier. David is not caring, is sitting at the bar, sipping a Windhoek, enjoying the general mushroomy sensation. He sees Gayathrie struggling to push her way through the throng, determination set onto her usually smiling features, her tiny arms pushing against the oblivious hip-hoppers. But soft skin and hard beauty (how could he not have noticed before?) give her an elfin glow, luminous, partly

in the spirit world, but nonetheless made of pure steaming flesh. Silence falls and crackles in the music.

‘Yo,’ he manages, ‘Gayathrie!’

Her smile flares onto him like a search-light, ‘David!’ A benevolent demi-goddess shining in her own golden light. The music thumps in. He extends his hand and pulls her through the molasses of crowd. She slips into a narrow space beside him, leaning against the bar. They conspire to order another drink. David orders another beer from the lugubrious barman and Gayathrie asks for a blueberry daiquiri (because she likes the umbrellas). They talk, heads bowed together, neither understanding, both laughing.

Everything slows to a halt, his senses drain from his body. Gayathrie is gone, so is the bar. The lights have switched off and a new tune is spinning. Behold: the great baggies, the baggies of wonder, the bluest, most floral baggies ever made. Deep blue flowers catherine-wheel and somersault in a universe of luminous Caribbean turquoise, stars exploding and imploding in rapid vibrations. These are the greatest baggies, indeed, of all time, illuminated under ultraviolet strobe-lights, living a life of their own - their owner, their life-force, is invisible, a ghost in the machine.

By reflex he tips his beer towards his mouth with partial success. The cool bubbles wake him and he has another quick re-group, stock take, census.

This time it is Gayathrie who is leading *him* through the molasses, through the moles and the asses, tits and asses... moving to the tune of the Great Baggies... help... he is on the dance floor, moving to the same tune; his spinal column has taken over where his brain has left off. Around him he sees the faces, distorted, magnified, beautified, of Patrice (bless her), Max and Lebo, all flowing and glowing. He loses touch.

A memory gap later and he looks around, the Great Baggies are gone, the lights are on, the gold is glittering, and beside him is Gayathrie, whom the music now obeys. Around her are Ayesha, Anton, Kelly, Gugu, and Chantelle, all seemingly lost to the cause, all twisted, acting strangely, cowering or stretching into claw shapes. Or crawling around on the floor, whimpering. Gayathrie opens her glowing, treacle eyes. This time it is she who sings across the void: 'Yo! David!'

He waves back and they make their way towards each other through the gods and monsters and make their own zone where they dance in each other's protection. Time disappears in their cocoon and only space remains. Patience, understanding, love. But most of all we need love. Ain't that the truth.

Time slips a few rungs and he and Gayathrie are headed for the chill room, clasping hands, still cocooned. There they lie on jungle air-beds and David begins to confess that he is torn between two loves, that his father grew rich from slaving Zulus in hostels, that the old man now despises him because David has accepted the demise of the *ancien regime* and he has not, because David does not hope to expand his father's empire, because he wants to work for a struggling NGO helping people help themselves and such nonsense. That he does not understand his father, that he is alienated from his mother who is no more than a mute satellite circling his father (he does not know why she has never risen up and rebelled against his orders), that his younger brother - a professional quad-bike racer - is favoured by both.

Gayathrie offers redemption during these confessions, glowing like a Hindu angel, nodding in patient understanding.

The tide turns and she is confiding in him, their bodies slung together in a half-inflated mattress. She tells him how her identity is adrift, that she has no source for her

values, that she must struggle to find her own from first principles which is a constant struggle since she can use no precedent, but that she refuses to be daunted by this obstacle. After all, this country didn't fight for nothing... But (she adds, her timbre dropping) it's all hypocrisy anyway. Her parents live like colonial barons on the Tanzanian riviera with fifteen house-servants including a rusty pair whose job it is to open and close the iron gate leading up to their estate on the jungle-covered hill. They are in fact no better than David's father.

The pills are easing off, but the mushrooms are coming on stronger than ever, more than the usual mild bumblebee buzz, more like a helicopter thud-*thud* thud-*thud*. The chill-out room takes on impossible proportions and colours, their way out is meandering or circular and involves repeated falling and rolling and giggling at the sheer farce of it all, the froth of Joburg's triple espresso.

It is at one of these stages that they roll under a curtain of opaque orange gauze onto another air-mattress and find themselves in an orange enclave, the ceiling an undulating tangerine sky. They land side-by side, face-to-face. A sudden gravity wraps itself around them, its coils tightening. Weight is suspended and time slows to a syrupy crawl. Orange pervades their senses: warm, joyful, soft, child-like, slightly mad. The moment lasts until their lips are almost brushing. Gayathrie pulls back slightly and the coils fall to the floor. David grips her hand in his and makes her join a promise to always remain friends, especially when they are... more sober. The words clang to the floor and the spell is broken and they start laughing again because they are on pills and talking kuk in this Venusian landscape with its strange inhabitants. They roll, climb and stagger their way their way out of the chillout room, looking for the next adventure. Their eyes compensate for orange-saturation by giving

the gold a sheen of blue, metallic and monetary. They are pointing and oo-ing and aa-ing like two ketamine crawlers on vacation.

For some time they harbour a paranoia about people calling their names, which soon spills into uncontrollable giggles, two nutters in the crackerfactory, until they turn in unison to see their booth, peopled with the whole crew, waving and calling through the blue-hazed air as if they were on a cliff across a wide valley. One look tells them that anarchy reigns at this table. Memory gaps flutter through earnest discussions in gibberish about nonsense and hilarious whispers about Absalom with Anton and Max. In a moment of relative lucidity he asks Max to find the World Bank contact for CES. They are, after all, the money behind this venture, and it's good policy (the word drops from his mouth in stones – *po-li-cy*) to know your competition, your risks. Besides, if it helps him find out more about the murders it might help him find Absalom, and of equal importance, help convince him to return with David to Cape Town to make his claim.

The final disintegration: dancing, drinking, driving, shouting, falling, shagging, hugs, drugs and they all are naked on Anton's bed, moving like an octopus. But the Thai White, which David thinks is just more coke, slams everything to a halt in a shower of vomit and he crawls into a hole with fire raging around him, watching Anton running through the open door, cackling like a demented goblin, holding a can of splashing petrol, screaming that he has set fire to the kitchen. The penultimate thought to slip away is *that damn acid* and after a darkness the last is relief that Gayathrie's face is floating inches from his, tear-stained and mud-scarred and glowing in the firelight.

Again the dream: the beach, the family picnic on the grass and the colourful beach houses and the waves splashing against the rocks and the tidal pool. The day-moon in a crescent above, the children, hyped-up on sugar from too much soft-drink, running amok, laughing, falling, wet and dry, the sparkling reflections on the water. From above the high mountains, from inside a sudden light, descends the metal craft, inside it the eternal eye of investigation, the scientists. An indefinable feeling in his stomach tells him this is a memory, real, but logic (what of it he can muster now) suggests that this vision is only a dream, a creation of his mind. As he lurches and trips towards consciousness he is again torn with ambivalence over which of these beliefs to trust – are the scientists inside him, or from outside humans and their understanding? After a hundred, a thousand such awakenings he still has no answer, but then his stomach digests a new pocket of tequila which shuts down all unnecessary faculties and his thoughts swim back out of focus and into a toxic darkness.

## Chapter 9--SWAZILAND

David had never been considered by his father as *een van die manne*. Since he was a teenager he had refused repeated entreaties to go hunting in the Northern Transvaal. This was not because he was squeamish. In fact, the notion of killing an animal was quite appealing to him: ritual called for the initiate hunter to rip out the animal's liver with a hunting knife, take a bite of the steaming organ, then hold the remainder aloft whilst bellowing across the bushveld. But these expeditions always coincided with a surfing trip to Jeffrey's Bay or sandboarding in Namibia or a hellish drug-fiasco with Georgina. It was never understood that it was not fear that held David back; it was that he never considered hunting *important*.

Nor was David man enough to play rugby, get into fights, drink brandy and Coke or bring home wholesome girls. Instead he lazed on the beach, wore expensive clothes, drank white Russians or champagne, brought home Constantia kugels, incoherent models or, disaster, Angeline. His father despaired, reminding him of the sacrifices men had made to protect South Africa, of the desert soldiers who had stared down the eyes of machine guns or treaded through mine-fields in the Angolan bush. He reminded David of the work it had

taken to make his fortune, to give David the life he was now squandering. He didn't rise from the ashes to see David return to them.

It was for this reason that Michael, *Mike* to his friends, arranged the job at GES – to make David a *man*, where he must deal in commerce, cold cash, golf-course banter, tax-law, balance-sheets, income statements. David was reluctantly forced into this bargain – the alternative was to be cut off from the flow of money and set adrift in a harsh, unforgiving New South Africa, replete with affirmative action and race quotas. An end to the constant vodka and Kalua. Simon was an old friend of Michael's and equally interested in making David one of the *manne*, since he had also fought on the 'border'. Simon accepted Michael's request and now here is David, unconscious under a bush in Anton's back yard, naked, riddled with toxins, having delirious dreams about alien space-ships. The firemen still lingering have not yet spotted him.

He crawls out from under the bush. Three firemen stand in silence on the patch of lawn, holding mugs of steaming tea. Not bothering to cover his nakedness, David limps back inside. Used-up drugs still course through his veins.

The kitchen is a scorched mess and patches of the flat are blackened or burnt. Once the firemen have left, Anton sets a table on the lawn and makes a pot of tea. Gugu and Chantelle are gone: Gugu was taken into custody for attacking a fireman. Ayesha and Gayathrie had jumped over the fence and woken the neighbours, who put them out on the street where they crawled to a bus shelter and fell asleep. All this was preceded by the firemen's arrival, upon which Anton, screaming, insisted that all the remaining drugs must be ingested immediately to avoid prosecution.

David, Anton and Kelly spend the day sipping pot after pot of tea, smoking cigarettes, watching the birds in the garden.

That night they smoke a joint and go to the cinema to watch an action movie.

Monday morning starts cool and silent. David is up with the first glow in the east, packing his bags into the derelict Landrover. He sticks his head into Anton's room, where he and Kelly are curled up naked on the bed, and whispers his thanks and farewells.

Once inside the car with the door closed, he realises that Joburg was no more than a bubble, a digression, a lost weekend, a blip between Friday and Monday. This thought comforts him as he starts up the engine and lumbers out of Anton's driveway, onto the open road again. He stops at a petrol station on Greyston drive to buy a pie, a Coke and a packet of cigarettes. Cold dew lines the barbed-wire fence of the petrol station, waiting for the heat of the day to sap it. As the first rays of sun strike the city of gold, penetrating its cover of dust and smoke, he swings onto the N12 – Swaziland 378km.

He speeds through the great suburbs of Germiston, Boksburg and Benoni. From an overpass he can almost see his old house, the three-bedroom face-brick monstrosity they lived in after moving up from P.E. His old school must be just around the corner. They only spent two years here, and he has no nostalgia for his old life. In those days his father was often drunk and taciturn, unable to find work, his mother exhausted from holding two temp jobs or crying quietly in her room. He could never understand why this was, and it disturbed him – was it the job of men to lash out when angry and that of women to collapse, give way to tears? Why?

The Afrikaans primary school he attended was street-rough: miner's sons and the progeny of the unemployed or unemployable. He learned to fist-fight in the linoleum-scented corridors of Christian National Education. He learned about the Great Trek every year and sung the National Anthem in English and Afrikaans every morning. He invented stories to compete with the others' – of his father chasing down kaffirs in his bakkie and demolishing them with a cricket bat, just for fun. For all he knew the stories could be true.

In the last days of the white government, seeing inevitable disaster approaching, government officials haemorrhaged money from the regime. One of Michael's friends, *een van die manne*, had a position in the civil service. With the stroke of a pen he transformed his friend from a drunken handyman into the proprietor of a government-contracted firm. He used Zulu hostel-workers to build more hostels for Zulus. With their modern slave-labour he constructed the primitive residences, barely fit for pigs, for a fraction of his payment. The company blossomed. With his newfound wealth Michael wanted to start his life again and when David was thirteen, while the regime was tottering on its last legs, the family set up shop in an ostentatious mansion in Bishopscourt, where Michael promptly built a tennis court. Through all these memories, unbeckoned, waft the scents of concrete and linoleum, a sweet memory. David tightens his fists on the steering-wheel, suddenly ready to fight.

The new government continued to use Michael's firm. His circular exploitation of Zulu workers halted (hostels were proclaimed cruel and inhuman), but the Reconstruction and Development Programme needed builders. Michael hired a silent partner, his most compliant Zulu, to negotiate new contracts with the new regime. The money flooded in.

When asked by his British friends whether he felt guilty about the source of his family's wealth, David always replied that he should feel no more guilty than they. In fact,

they should feel far *more* guilty. First world wealth is the product of third-world suffering. First-worlders – whether they are on the dole or aristocrats - sit back in self-congratulation, appreciating the effects but not the causes. David would argue that the only moral difference between wealthy Africans and Europeans is that the wealthy of the third world have the courage to look those they are fucking full in the face. And that the atrocities of the latter (crippling whole countries, whole continents, the planet's ecology) are on a much larger scale. But this argument only results in blank stares from his British friends. Syntax error - Abort, retry, ignore?

He reaches Springs, the final outskirts of the Metropolis. Yellow man-made hills dot the landscape, the bowels of the earth regurgitated and reconstituted, robbed of their value. Asbestos blows in the wind here. Springs was once the world's greatest producer of gold; now it is the world's greatest collection of exhausted rock heaps. He dwells on the fact that for every artificial hill there is an artificial space a mile below the surface, a warren of partially collapsed tunnels and galleries. Gauteng rests on aerated rock. For every scrap of gold we leave an empty room underground and a ton of yellow bile above.

The false hills disappear from the rear window. Suburbs give way to mielie-farms and open veld, wide expanses of grazing, broken by the occasional line of poplars or a triangular dam or the long line of a dirt road leading to the distant compound of a farmer's house. David feels a sudden relief to be out of the city, once again alone and independent like the meteor he likes to be. He winds down all the windows so that the warm wind whips through the cabin, slips his new 50 Cent CD into the frontloader and lights a cigarette, letting the smoke swirl around

the car, mixing with the summer air. He rolls through highveld towns: Devon, Kinross, Ermelo, huddles of construction under the vast hot sky.

After a few hours on the road he reaches the escarpment and starts to wind down a series of steep gorges between boulder-strewn hills covered in dense bush. The dry morning heat of the highveld turns humid and the clouds swell and merge, holding the heat and the damp tightly to the earth. Cicadas scream with excitement; flocks of weavers and swallows dart from tree to tree, scattering and reforming. David stops at a look-out point on the shoulder of a koppie. Below him bush-covered hills roll towards the lowveld, all the way to Swaziland and Mozambique.

He switches the engine off. The silence is sudden and powerful, disturbed only by the whistle of wind over rock. He sits on a wall skirting a small cliff and gazes at the view. The land below is broken into hills and valleys, sudden koppies and expanses of flat veld. Villages perch on the hilltops. Just below him cows and goats graze under the cover of thorn trees.

*How strange, he thinks, to be here. So far from home.* He thinks of Georgina: she is probably at Bardeli now, downing Vodka Bulls for breakfast, flirting with the barmen. Suddenly bored, he gets back into the car and pulls *Man and Space* from under the passenger seat. He lights another cigarette and pages through the old book, inspecting the hand-drawn, monochrome illustrations.

The last page of the book illustrates, using arrows and figures, that the Andromeda galaxy is two million light-years from Earth, but an astronaut travelling near the speed of light would, thanks to the effects of relativity, take only twenty-eight years of astronaut-time to get there and another twenty-eight years to return. Unfortunately, by the time he reaches

Earth, fifty-six astronaut-years later, the planet would have aged four million years, its forests stripped, its humans evolved. The intrepid astronaut would be no more than a relic, an alien. David stubs out his cigarette, tucks the book back under the passenger seat, and takes off, churning up dust.

Hours pass of crawling behind trucks, waiting for an opportunity to overtake. The N12 is busy. He rolls and smokes a small joint with one hand and chases it with a cold beer (the fridge is powered by the car battery). This summer with Georgina has been one of the best of his life. His thoughts drift through a hazy montage of parties, dancing, making love in strangers' bathrooms.

His reverie is disrupted by a phone call from Simon. David tells him about Absalom's life as a gangster, how he ended up in Swaziland, and his own appointment with Pius. He leaves out what Max had told him: the CIA, the World Bank, the giant corporation with its trail of missing opponents. Simon seems encouraged and leaves him with instructions to phone again as soon as there are any further developments.

The phone lingers in his hand. He quick-dials Georgina's number. She answers, laughing. There is a great deal of noise in the background – people shouting, loud music.

'SORRY!' she shouts, 'CAN'T SPEAK NOW!'

Her voice disappears down a funnel of noise and the line is cut. Great.

The CD ends and he lights another cigarette. Smoke is sucked from his mouth and whipped out the window to mix with the bush and the heat.

He is scattered, but his thoughts settle, like a roulette ball, on Angeline. Twenty-three, black, odd. Place your bets. How long will he have to wait for her? Does she *still* hold a grudge against him? What was so evil about his suggestion anyway? When he

whispered the words into her ear, as they surreptitiously met beside an ice-cream vendor, her face hardened into a terracotta mask. Had the Big Wide World finally corroded his heart and putrefied his brain? He hastily explained, under the laser-sights burning from her eyes, that they had been having an affair all along – what does she think their heated meetings in the PE garden were? A *relationship*? She knows just as well as he does that the element of secrecy turns her blood from luke-warm to scorching. Affairs last much longer than *relationships* anyway, longer than marriages certainly. She raised an eyebrow, as one might when a bergie vomits on one's suede shoe, and allowed him to squeeze a business card into the tiny patch of her bikini. A tiny smile tickled the corners of her lips as he turned, ashamed, and plodded back to find his bankie and his shoes.

Not that she will grant him an escape from her: she has cast a spell on him, a sangoma-spell that he does not understand and therefore cannot break. He has paid gravely for his flippancy. But does he really want Georgina, his concubine, his porn-star? Has he also lost her? The questions begin chasing tails, but the greatness of the land comforts him, the infinity of the horizon, the perfection of the sky that has to stretch to reach it, the dense anger of the lowveld bush.

He reaches the border post, little more than a gate and a guardhouse simmering in the heat. Behind the border fence are freshly ploughed fields of black earth, smelling of loam. The bush around these fields is vivid green and tightly packed, as if there is barely room enough for the abundance of life. A cacophony of insects and birds fills the unmoving air.

There is not another human in sight, but a handful of cars are parked outside the guardhouse. He parks and scratches about for money and documents. It suddenly occurs to him that he has no passport and no visa. *Merde.*

Inside the South African border office the walls are washed hospital green and the air of dilapidation is hardly disturbed by a slow, creaking ceiling fan. There are three barred counters. One is open, before which a line of people stand listlessly – a fat farmer and his ugly family, a skinny farmer and his fat wife, an obese black businessman and his tiny black briefcase. Behind the counter is an unusually short man, bordering on midget size, with a trimmed moustache and a way of never seeming to do anything. At present he is staring at the farmer's face, his expression saying: *you are too fat and too stupid to travel abroad. Please go home.*

He waits half an hour for the queue to move off and sidles up to the dwarf official. He explains carefully that on his way to the border he was mugged and they took his wallet, which contained all his travel documents. He does, however, have his driver's licence and money to pay for the visa. The official is immobile, as if David has not yet spoken.

'Passport and visa,' he croaks, staring at an indeterminate point in the middle of the room. David repeats his explanation.

'Passport and visa.'

This exchange repeats itself with various modulations in mood – camaraderie, pleading, anger, threats, stoicism, desperation. None of these work. A game ranger behind him carrying a rifle and an unusually long nose politely asks him to move on. He stalks out into the dust and starts stomping and swearing.

He knows the score. Once, after a vicious weekend on a houseboat on Kariba, where they had made friends with a Namibian drug-baron on a neighbouring boat who had a suitcase full of ecstasy and a trunk full of AK's, they had lost their passports to the deep Kariba waters. But they had bribed their way back across the Zimbabwean border, no problem. They had even managed to smuggle Inge's epileptic miniature sausage-dog, Ernie, without quarantine or papers, and despite the fact that he was shaking and yelping as they passed the border gate and the laughing guards.

He sits on the bonnet of his car, his face a picture of helplessness. Soon enough a malnourished dirty man wearing tattered jeans and a ragged red t-shirt approaches him. He seems confident but is constantly looking over his shoulder. They shake hands. His name, my friend, is Jabulani. They exchange the traditional questions about their health, the health of their families (they are hungry, says Jabulani), their origin (uvelaphi?).

Jabulani sits beside David. He smells of stale sweat and hunger.

'Explain to me your problem.'

David repeats his sad monologue. Jabulani is a caricature of concern.

'I can help you, my friend.'

Jabulani instructs David to drive to the nearest village, where he must buy two bottles of Bells (one for each gate-guard) and draw four-hundred rand (two-hundred for each border official) and perhaps a little extra for himself ('I am very hungry'). He knows he can give Jabulani no less than two-hundred rand. Why should unhelpful officials receive two-hundred and he less? This man had calculated with just one glance that David would be able to spare almost a thousand rand. It's a good thing, thinks David, that he does not know about the company credit card.

The new gifts smooth his way across the border. Jabulani has clearly spoken to the staff: the sour dwarf now greets him with a smile. David hands over the money in a folded scrap of paper. The official feigns an investigation, stamps various forms, and hands them to David without a word. He points to the exit. 'Out.'

Jabulani is standing with the guards at the final gate on the Swaziland side of the border. He is arguing and gesticulating violently to the guards, but ceases when David arrives. The guards are pleased with their bottles of Bells, but Jabulani seems disappointed with the two-hundred rand. *No matter*, thinks David, as he speeds off between the black-earthed valleys and the green, forested hills.

Relieved, he winds down the windows, slips a Creedence CD into the frontloader, and lights a cigarette. An odd sense of joy floods through him. He sings at top volume – '*When it's over, so they say, it'll rain on a sunny day, I know! Shining down like water...*' He glances at his watch. Ten a.m. Plenty of time to sing. '*And I wanna know, have you ever seen the rain, coming down on a sunny day?*'

He drives through fertile territory of forest plantations and lush bush. Beside the road are numerous enclaves selling cheap African craftwork or baskets of vegetables. On the outskirts of Mbabane he passes the Swaziland College of Technology, ironically alone in the rough bush. He does not stop in the dreary capital, with its dirty buildings and sprawling curio markets.

In contrast to the city, the Manzini road leading South is beautiful, living up to its name of Ezulwini, Place of Heaven. He passes Lobamba, the site of the Royal Residences and Parliament buildings, outside which throngs of Swazis in traditional dress parade the

streets. Further down the valley he stops at a roadside café, proprietor V.N. Naidoo. He sits in the cool shade of an awning and sips a Coke, while a grey-haired Indian, presumably Mr Naidoo, discusses the state of the economy and the debts that have been incurred by him to his cousins in Eshowe.

The exit to the Royal Swazi Sun is not far from the café. A suite has been reserved for him, overlooking the swimming pool and its aura of deck-chairs, and beyond that the golf course and the wild Valley of Heaven. Tourists patter about below in slow motion, tanned and drinking or swimming on their backs, eyeing the bursts of cloud above.

He descends to The Deck, a restaurant also overlooking the pool, and chooses a scant buffet lunch. He is feeling frivolous. After lunch he browses in the hotel shop and buys a striped golf shirt. If he is going to meet Pius on his own turf, he might as well have the correct attire.

At the clubhouse he hires a golf cart and trundles down the maze of paths towards the ninth hole, furthest from the hotel. The green, the final extremity of tamed land, is walled by tall Acacia trees and thick undergrowth. The sun beats down like a hammer. There, leaning against his own golf cart, scrutinising the lay of the green, is a pot-bellied man with a grim face, wearing a pink golf shirt and loose khaki trousers. A golf ball lies before him, on the very edge of the green.

David parks beside him. The man, presumably Pius, squats before the ball and closes one eye.

‘To get the ball in the hole,’ he says in a clear, university-English accent, but dispensing with all formalities, ‘you must consider many... variables. The gradient, the slope

from left to right, the thickness of the grass, its moisture. Even the strength and direction of the wind, if necessary.'

He stands up, still eyeing the ball. 'And none of these are simple. Like this hole: over here it slopes from left to right, but over there,' he gestures towards the middle of the green, 'it swings sharply from right to left again. Over here,' he motions to his left, 'the ball must go uphill, but over here,' he motions to his right, 'it will go downhill again.'

David attempts to introduce himself, to shake hands. Pius ignores him.

'I know who you are. George has told me your story. My question to you is: what game are you playing? What are your... variables?'

'I'm only doing my job. I've been asked to find Absalom Thembeke. There is plenty of money at stake for him. He has inherited a powerful position and a large sum of money.'

'Yes. Money – a variable. But do you know what the other variables are? Do you even know what game you are playing? Perhaps, Mister Barendse, you are wasting your time. Wasting my time.'

'I have not come all the way to Swaziland to waste time.' He is irritated now. Who is this pompous fool to lecture him?

Pius smiles like a vulture. 'Of course not.'

He lines up the putter, taking his time. He taps the ball, which crests a small incline, nearly slows to a halt, then swings down the other side, shuttles around the rim of the hole and comes to rest a few inches away.

'Good shot.'

'Still a par, not a birdie. Par is par.'

Pius taps the ball in with one hand, nonchalant.

‘If you don’t want to waste my time, you must give me the one variable I need. What is in it for me? Why should I help you?’

David has come prepared to this question. ‘Name your price.’

Pius beckons and they walk across to the tenth tee. Once he has pushed a tee into the ground and balanced his ball upon it, he continues:

‘I want ten percent of anything Absalom gains from this. Net – before tax, before anything. This is not negotiable. Also, you must guarantee his safety. It is my job to protect him. With you I am throwing his luck to the wind. The task will fall on you.’

A phrase from Creedence – *The Devil’s on the loose, better run through the jungle...* He hesitates. This is more than he had bargained for.

‘If I don’t find him, I owe you nothing?’

‘Yes.’

‘Fine.’

They shake on it. It is clear that there will be no written contract. Which makes it all the more serious. It is his life, his family, his – he imagines – his kneecaps, that are his collateral.

‘Why do you think Absalom came to work for us, for the Nigerians?’

Pius takes the attitude of a pedagogue, making David the child. David shakes his head mutely. He must humour this arrogant *indoda*.

‘If you have read your Machiavelli, you will know that for every legal family there is an illegal counterpart. The Nigerians worked in the Fort Campbell area – we grew our dagga there, smuggled our guns through there, kept our drivers and growers and negotiators there. We worked with the Thembeke family – they turned a blind eye to our plantations, we made

sure they were well repaid. We gave their people work. The poor people earn nothing from mielies or bananas or cattle. These are not export industries – the rich countries pay their farmers to grow these things. The people must have work, and we gave them jobs.’

‘When the time came, we were the protectors of the Thembeke family. If their enemies hurt them, we would strike back. We would ask no questions. It was a matter of loyalty.’

‘The Mnanzi family has their own shadow family, their own gang. They are called the Moroccans, even though only the guys right at the top are from Morocco. Mostly they are Congolese, Capetonian, local. They do the same work for the Mnanzi as we do for the Thembeke. They grow on what land the Mnanzi have left. Take care of their dirty work.’

Pius selects a three wood and settles himself into his driving stance. Three practice swings and he *donners* the ball into the distance, out of sight. David turns towards his cart, but Pius takes his shoulder. ‘No – let’s walk and talk.’

They follow the path along the fairway, skirting the bush. Pius continues:

‘It’s not this simple. The Thembeke, back in the day, had sold out. They were impimpis, traitors. To keep them in place, the old government helped them, protected them. Gave them, off the record, guns, money, information. This was passed on to us, until we began to work directly with the government, doing *their* dirty work, for a price.’

David fixes him with a shocked stare. A flutter of embarrassment crosses Pius’s face.

‘Dollar bills my friend. We weren’t in it for the politics then. *Pantsula fo’ life.*’

‘The Moroccans ended up working for the ANC underground – helping them with sabotage, assassinations, weapons. Protection. Also for a price. Don’t think they took fewer lives than us. It’s not true.’

David is listening carefully. 'I see.'

Pius eyes him with another grim smile.

'But again that is not all. You know that the Americans helped out the government. Sent them arms through Israel. Helped them here and there with sanctions, self-sufficiency. Any way they could, off the record. So we were often given R5's, R4's. Israeli weapons. But the Mnanzi got their stuff from the ANC, who were helped by the Russians and the Cubans, from Mozambique and Angola. They would have AK47's.'

David is beginning to connect the dots. 'The murders were with AK's. So you think... the Mnanzi sent the Moroccans to do it?'

Pius lopes easily, his golf bag rolling behind him.

'That's what you might think, if you didn't know all the variables.'

David keeps quiet so as not to betray his rising impatience.

'I have no doubt that the Mnanzi are looking for him, and that the Moroccans want to kill him. Also that this R&R crew want him.'

'He's quite a popular guy.'

'You could say that.'

They walk in silence for some time, Pius seemingly pondering his next words.

'All this will help you find out who killed Absalom's family, and who is trying to kill him now. But it will not help you find Absalom. Because it was not they from whom Absalom was running when he went into hiding. And if you want to find someone, coax them from their hiding-hole, you must know whom they are hiding from, what they fear.'

David shrugs his shoulders, arches his eyebrows. Pius is making rhetorical statements.

‘My friend, Absalom spent three years being hunted by, and was nearly killed by, the Thembeke family themselves. It was only because he was a *pantsula*, a brother, that we protected him. He tried hiding in Soweto, but it was too easy to find him. That was where they first tried to kill him, in George’s shebeen. That was when he was brought here. But they found him again. Now he is gone, and I do not know where he is. Only the spirits can tell you now.’

‘So how does this help me?’ snaps David, tired of this circular speech.

Pius shows no offence at his sharpness.

‘To understand this, you must understand the secrets of Absalom’s family.’

They have reached the tenth green. Pius repeats his ritual: squatting behind the ball with one eye open, scrutinising every curve and every dip.

‘Do you know Absalom’s family?’ he asks.

‘Well, I’ve looked at the family history, but only the official records.’

Again he lines up the putter. He taps the ball lightly. It rolls down a fifteen foot slope, swinging gently to the left, and disappears into the hole. Pius is visibly impressed.

‘Birdie!’

The next hole is a par-four, so Pius selects a thick titanium driver. He places the ball and turns to David, curious.

‘Do you know who NoGovernment is? Who Big Mandla is?’

‘Yes.’

Pius takes his three practice swings and slams the ball into the distance. David starts towards the fairway, but Pius steers him back towards the ninth green, suggesting that they

use their carts, since the tenth green is a long way off. On their way back they skirt the other side of the fairway, which meanders between deep bunkers, stands of trees, and koi ponds.

‘Big Mandla was Sipiwo’s older brother. A big man. Strong. Powerful. He cared only for his family. He was one of the first to make friends with the government, in the interests of the family. Before he died he ruled the Thembeke with a strong fist. Sipiwo lived in his shadow.’

‘When the white government finally made him chief of Fort Campbell, the power went to his head. He would tolerate no questions; his desires were law in the family. Meanwhile, Absalom was a young boy, an *inkwenkwe*, herding cows out in the bush. He was a strong boy, just like his great-uncle. There is even a story – I don’t know if it’s true – of him killing a lion that attacked a calf. He smashed its head in with a *knobkierrie*. There were still lions in the Transkei in those days. Now they have all been shot. He was a brave boy.’

‘He was also a good student, so the family sent him to Fort Hare to join the other sons of chiefs, sons of wealthy men. Like his great-uncle, Absalom was powerful. What’s the word? Charismatic. He spoke against the government, against the *impimpis*. Absalom also started riding with the *tsotsis*, Solomon’s boys, spending his father’s money, not caring for his responsibilities. He started growing dreadlocks, thick dreads that surrounded his face like the mane of a lion. The students followed him – he was strong, handsome, convincing, rich.’

‘NoGovernment, Absalom’s mother, was a very beautiful woman, one of the most beautiful women in the whole of the Transkei. Her father was also the chief of a Xhosa tribe, near Lusikisiki in the Northern Transkei. She was born in the same year that her father was made chief by the white Government. He was so happy that he named her after the

government. NoGovernment was a real prize: she could read and write, she worked hard. Little Mandla, Absalom's father, the son of Sipiwo, was a lucky man.'

'While Absalom was away at Fort Hare, Little Mandla died in a car crash. This left his mother all alone in the house. Big Mandla, as the chief, saw her as his, inherited from his nephew. But when NoGovernment refused Big Mandla's advances, he raped her. She was, after all, only property.'

'Meanwhile, Absalom returned from Fort Hare to mourn his father. When he arrived at the house, Big Mandla was buckling up his belt; NoGovernment was crying on the bed.'

'The next day Absalom called Big Mandla into the veld, saying he wanted to talk. But his tsotsi friends were waiting in the bushes. Absalom did not say a word to his great-uncle. He just walked away, leaving the tsotsis to do their dirty work with knobkierries, fists and boots.'

'Everyone knew who had killed Big Mandla, but he was a tyrant, so the family did not mourn in their hearts. But Absalom received threats from Big Mandla's friends, loyal to their old chief. Fearing for his life, Absalom ran to Soweto, where he came to work for us. He became a *pantsula*, a gangster. He stayed there for three years, become a *brother*.

'But Sipiwo was missing his grandson. Absalom had been his favourite grandchild. Sipiwo negotiated with Big Mandla's supporters, who eventually let Absalom return. But by then Sipiwo was old and going a little bit... mad. He refused to see Absalom, the murderer of his brother. He banished Absalom from Fort Campbell.'

'Absalom returned to Alice, where he still had some friends, and worked for us there. But after some time he was tired of living in a small town and prepared to move back to Soweto. At the last minute Sipiwo allowed him to return to Fort Campbell. He embraced

Absalom again. For the first time in many years Absalom could see his mother and his cousins, who he was good friends with – Moses, Joseph, Thando. Good boys. All dead now.’

‘But Big Mandla’s friends did not like this new upstart. In the veld near Big Mandla’s house they gave him a beating, as a warning. He ran back to Soweto, scared, back into hiding. There were some negotiations to allow him to return, but they all failed.’

‘By now the election had come and gone, and Siphiwo was old. The family was seen as weak, divided. Their support was gone – to the new government they were nothing but *impimpis*. To keep their place the family had to stay strong, stay together. Siphiwo wanted to end the conflict with Big Mandla’s faction of the family. He ordered a hit squad to take out Absalom, but he secretly asked them to let him off with a few injuries, let him live.’

‘They burst into George’s shebeen and opened fire. They shot him five times. They thought they had gone too far, that he was dead. They told this to Big Mandla’s faction, and to Siphiwo, but since they showed him no body, he assumed that they had carried out his command.’

‘But Absalom survived and spent six months in Baragwanath. He was scared, and to the world he pretended he was dead, except to George and myself, his *bras*. He had saved my life before, and I promised to protect him. He came to Swaziland to hide, and try to continue working for us on the border, smuggling dagga and cars, where no-one would know him. The peace lasted for almost a year, until the Moroccans found Absalom in the bush near our camp. Whether they were hired by the Mnanzi or by Big Mandla’s old guard I don’t know. How they found him, I also don’t know. They shot him in the chest. I heard the

gunshot and later found him in the bush, bleeding to death. By some miracle he survived. The ancestors were looking after him.'

'Meanwhile, the aging Sipiwo spent his days mourning his lost grandson. He turned away from his family, who became irritated and divided by the reclusive chief. The Mnanzi saw them as weak, and stepped up their age-old conflict. This continued for some time, always getting worse and worse, until last week. Boom – the whole Thembeke family is killed.'

They reach the ninth green. Pius squeezes into his cart. David follows the tilting vehicle towards the tenth fairway, where, at length, they locate the ball. Pius selects a five-iron and practices, squinting into the distance, where the green is perched on a narrow hilltop. He slams the ball away and they locomote up the hill.

On the green he takes his time, walking around, eyeing the ground.

'What happened to Absalom after that?' prompts David.

'Absalom knew they would be back. He didn't know what to do, where to hide. Then, on a trip to Durban to buy DP for export to Holland, he spoke to a sangoma about his problems. But the sangoma was not interested in Absalom's earthly concerns. This man, a powerful doctor, told Absalom he had great spiritual powers, that he was meant for the life of a sangoma. He took Absalom to the sangoma council, and they agreed: the spiritual powers of the man were strong. The ancestors would speak to him.'

'He took this as a sign. He disappeared from Swaziland to start his training. I have not seen him since. I don't know where he is. If you want to find Absalom you must ask the sangomas in Durban. Perhaps they know. That is the only help I can give you. But

remember all the variables: many people are looking for him, and not all of them are peaceful.'

'Yes, I must do it quietly. What happens if someone is tracking me and I lead them to Absalom? The Mnanzi, the Moroccans, R&R...'

Pius settles into his stance until he is completely still, and with a gentle tap he rolls the ball down the green. It drops into the hole with a quiet *knock*.

Pius looks like he is about to answer David's question when he stops, cocks his head, and suddenly claps his hands violently. Startled, a Guinea fowl flaps from the undergrowth and flies low over the fairway. With one motion Pius pulls an Uzzi from the golf cart and fires about ten rounds, disintegrating the bird's head and neck in a shower of red mist and broken feathers. The remains of the body fall with a thud, staining the green grass red.

He grins at David, his teeth yellow. His message is clear.

'The ancestors will protect Absalom. He will only be found if they let you find him. He is guarded by the spirits now.'

'And what about R&R?' asks David.

'The spirits will not help them.'

## Chapter 10--DURBAN

‘Yeah... No... No, I’m maxing here on North Beach, drinking a beer. Everybody drinks Black Labels here, so I’ve had three... No. Well, whatever, fine. Do what you want. Ja, the people here are so... well, the girls are OK, tanned, well-built, but the fashion, the clothes... are so bad. So bad. I don’t know, why does Durban exist at all? And the races are, like, divided by a knife. The whiteys stick to themselves. The Indians stick to their families. The Zulus just stick. Ja, no, no don’t... of course that not why... Georgina, don’t be like this, you’re just coming down. I’m not, of course not, fuck man... hello? Hello? Fuck!’

He slams the phone against the table, all the relaxation achieved over three beers gone. He is also coming down, the lubricants draining from the machinery of his brain. He is tempted to throw his pint-glass across the room, watch it shatter against the wall.

Instead he must sit in his deck-chair beside the rooftop pool. Durban feels safely distant, twenty stories below - the stink and the noise and the gridlock are no more than a hum up here. The air is fresh, a cool breath from the Indian Ocean. David is considering going to Joe Kools, a beach-bar he passed after his brief swim at North Beach, just outside the hotel. But he has a deadline, and who knows what R&R, or anyone else, are up to. As much as he would like to spend the day practicing homeopathic drinking to cure this

interminable come-down, he knows that he should start his search for the sangomas now. On the other hand, the exploding guinea-fowl keeps re-playing in his thoughts, and he can't help having a fearful desire to stay hidden in the undergrowth.

He refrains from ordering a four-storey Rainbow Cocktail. Suddenly he wants to cry. *The ecstasy has left me fragile*, he reminds himself, but it does not help: Georgina is gone, it's only a matter of time before they drop the last hope that their bubble of a world would withstand the lies and divisions and dissolution of trust. Her voice had wavered; she knew he was speaking to her from beside a drink, from behind a string of women. He knows instinctively that she was speaking to him from the bed of another man, hushing him up, giggling with her sparkling blue eyes.

Changing his mind, he orders a Rainbow for the road. He thinks about Angeline's green eyes and their shifting shades of hard emerald, dusky aloe, livid green-mamba. In the mornings they are a gloomy sea, a forest beach, the ashen reflection of the sky a distant jade.

The streets of Durban are chokingly hot. Within seconds his clothes stick to his body. The city centre has indeed changed since David was last here, ten years ago. He is the only white person to be seen. The rumours are true: the modern, organised façade is crumbling. The once-shining office-towers are dirty, the shops are empty or closed or full of 'bargain fashions', the streets are heaped with garbage. It is true: the last remnants of the last outpost are collapsing. Shaka would be laughing in his dagger-filled grave.

Where the formal economy has collapsed, the informal has blossomed: pavements are packed with street vendors and pedestrians, traffic crawls and hoots in a near-standstill. The 1970s apartment blocks, meant to house urban whites and their modern, fun, tropical lives,

now teem with gregarious Zulus, dozing on balconies or staring forlornly out of cracked windows. The exteriors of the buildings are streaked with algae and peeling paint, railings are rusted, the concrete split by heat or ferns or weather. Without maintenance the tropics will eat a house in ten years, an apartment block in twenty. In a decade this will be another Lagos.

He reaches Grey Street, the old Indian quarter - here he could just as well be in Delhi as Durban. Different eras jostle for commerce: a cellphone repair store beside a traditional tailor, a sari-shop, wholesalers, spice-vendors. Pink paint is peeling; eroding columns are cracked. But the dilapidation is unlike the desperate and irretrievable city centre – it is more an aesthetic of the passage of time than a surrender to its destructive powers.

The edges of the Victoria Street market blend with the African market, and for a time Indian and African stalls sell side-by-side. The smell of rotting meat drifts down the street - a *muti* store has been set up in the locked entrance to a closed shop. Arranged on the bare steps are rows of animal parts: skulls, femurs, skins, the bleached sword of a sword-fish. The spines of snakes hang from a rope slung across the doorway. A large whale-vertebra takes centre stage. The proprietor is nowhere to be seen, but a young woman in a sleek white business suit browses amongst the bones. *Why does an office worker need rotten bones?*

He walks past many similar stores with their carrion-smell and rows of dismembered creatures. At the end of the street, off-ramps to the freeway criss-cross over palm trees and the central bus stop. Between these curves, arches and bridges lies the African market, packed to the brim with shoppers. Many turn their eyes on David, the only white skin in an army of black punters. Progress through the crowded market is slow. The crowds seem reluctant to part for him and no-one seems to understand his requests for directions. He must

force his way through the packed halls and open-air markets, through the blaring Kwaito and cackling mammas. Some vendors pounce on him as if he is expressly there to buy naartjies, a chicken, baby clothing, a cheap radio. He brushes them off, soldiers on.

He emerges from a tunnel of clothing and sunglasses into a plaza surrounded by the concrete curve of an off-ramp and the back wall of the bus-station. Graffiti-covered, urine-soaked steps lead to a mezzanine level of shops, some of which are open, and have names like *Dr. Mr. T. Jabavu*, *Dr H.T. Smith*, *Surgery*, *Dr. Mr Mthimkhulu*. These must be *nyangas*, herbalists. Not quite sangomas, but a step in the right direction. He ascends the stairs, passes a barber operating from a beer-crate and a row of stalls selling pirated African tapes.

*Halengwe Herbs* - its only wares are a row of coloured tinctures in second-hand bottles, balanced on a rickety table, and a motley collection of old Coke bottles filled with home-brewed sorghum beer. The interior is dark, dirty and apparently abandoned. He steps inside. A girl is hiding behind a bookshelf loaded with beer-bottles. She wears a striped shirt and a red bandana and smiles coyly at David, baring her canines. She does not seem to understand a word of his enquiries; she only nods silently in agreement.

The next room is equally squalid and stinks of sorghum beer. Tables are heaped with roots, bark, leaves, grasses, and packets of herbs, all with hand-drawn labels: *umuthole*, *isobonso lendiki*, *ihlala emhlaphe*, *ukhamba olukhulu*. At first the shop seems deserted, but a deep voice calls to David from behind a cloth-covered doorway:

‘Ufunani umlungu? Ngubani igama lakho?’

‘My name is David. I need to see a sangoma.’

‘Ngena.’

David pushes aside the cloth. In a narrow chamber, sitting on an inverted vegetable crate, is an obese man in a sweat-soaked vest, whose jowly face is set in contempt.

‘Khuluma umlungu. Whom do you seek?’

‘I am looking for a man. I’ve been told he is training to be a sangoma. His name is Absalom Thembeka.’

The man does not turn to look at David. He says to the wall: ‘That is an amaXhosa name. You are looking in the wrong place.’

‘I know he is a Xhosa. But he was found by a Zulu sangoma. He was told he had great spiritual powers.’

The man stares sullenly at the wall.

‘What do you know about spiritual powers? Umlungu?’

‘Nothing, baba.’

The old man grimaces. ‘Nothing? You have never sat alone in the dark, looking at *ukushona*?’

David does not understand, can find no response.

‘I have never heard of this man.’ The old man looks away.

David repeats this process with other nyangas, and is met with surprise, threats, anger, resignation, but not recognition. He drifts through the market, planning to get helplessly drunk when he returns to the hotel, until a thin, coughing nyanga with eyes like yellow pebbles responds to the gift of a cigarette with a cryptic hint.

A Vervet monkey hangs from the roof by a wire strung through each eye-socket. Flesh has dried to a thin film over the skeleton. Its wrists are tied together above its head, as if

defending a blow; its legs have seized, bent, as if running. The skin, attached at the base of the skull, flares behind it like a cape, the tail tied to a roof-beam. Its teeth protrude in a permanent grin. In the heat, the stink, the opaque humidity, in the confines of the crowded bridge, the suspended carcass could be an avenging Tokoloshe, a sleeping demon, a crazed monster of the night locked in suspended animation.

This is the place. The nyanga had told him to look for the monkey on the bridge. He stoops under the unfortunate simian, trying not to choke on the stench of half-dry carcasses and bones and skins. He calls into the darkness at the back of the stall. A low female voice replies:

‘Ufunani?’

He repeats his story and is met with the familiar silence. He turns to leave, but is stopped short.

‘I know of this man. Ngena.’ Her voice is slow and lyrical, almost evangelical.

He brushes aside a stiff zebra-hide and finds himself in an office, more modern than he expected. A neat desk, a certificate on the wall, a window that overlooks the market under the bridge. Were the walls not of corrugated iron he could be visiting a medical doctor.

Behind the desk sits a young woman wearing a neat power-suit, as if she has just returned from a board meeting. Her dreadlocks are studded with cowrie shells. She has a pretty, oval face with a high forehead, a flat nose and a small rounded chin. Her complexion is light, more golden than chocolate, unlike her cacao eyes which are fixed on David.

She dispenses with the usual greetings. ‘The *enas* have warned me of you, *umuntu umhlope*.’

‘I am no danger to you.’

She laughs derisively. 'Of course not. Yet I have received this warning.'

She lets an uncomfortable silence settle.

'The fates of many spirits lie in the hands of the man you seek.'

'Well, I am no danger to any... spirits. Except of course, vodka and whiskey.'

Her misleadingly innocent face creases into a wry smile.

'Your reasons for seeking the Son of the Unbelievers concern us.'

David is evidently confused. She prompts him to sit down, like an errant child.

'The spirits,' she continues, 'swim ahead of us in the Great River of Time. Those who have trained their minds to listen to these whisperings in the soul, can hear these... warnings. I am being warned.'

'Does this mean you can help me?'

She dwells on his words for some time. 'It means that I will answer your questions, if you will answer mine.'

David nods his assent.

The sangoma inhales deeply and sits very still. She spreads her fingers against the desk; her knuckles go pale with force. Her eyes roll back.

She exhales suddenly and stares into David's eyes.

'His family was killed?'

'Yes.'

'Why do you think that happened?'

'I don't know. It could have been a gang murder, or a rival tribe, or just some tstotsis. I don't know.'

'You have not answered my question. What was the *reason* for the murders?'

‘When is a murder reasonable?’

‘That is a better answer, but it is a White answer. What do think would make a Bantu commit these crimes? What is different between the Bantu and the Whites? Between our religion and the Christian?’

‘Not all Whites are Christian.’

‘Not all Bantu remember their ancestors, that doesn’t make them any less Black.’

‘Touche’

‘What?’

‘Never mind.’

‘I will help you, ignorant *umlungu*. The Christians preach to turn the other cheek, to seek peace with your enemies. That is why you believe in democracy, in having squabbling rivals in the house of the Chief. The Bantu do not have such a flexible mind - we either agree with someone or we fight to the death.’

‘But now the country is a democracy. People can vote and there are dozens of political parties...’

‘Then you are beginning to see the problem.’

‘I don’t think so...’

‘Change is difficult for us. You whiteys always want change. You call it progress. But what we want is stability. How can you have this if the world is always changing?’

‘But you need change to survive. Otherwise you will end up like the dinosaurs: extinct.’

‘You think change means survival? That is just another White dream. Change means destruction: when people change they forget their ancestors and lose respect for what was

once holy. They can only find sorrow this way. Evolution means nothing if you lose your soul in the process.'

'What about inventions like cars and computers and hospitals? These things make life better for people. They can save people's lives.'

She snorts derisively through her flattened nostrils. 'You think I care for these things? You think their importance in the material world means something in the spirit world? The power to invent something new belongs to the Gods. For humans to claim such power is an insult to them. Such things must be destroyed, no matter how useful they are.'

'Why are you so stuck on the past? It's over. Don't you want a future that's better than the present?'

'Again you think like a child. You whiteys have your heads stuck in tomorrow, but the past is what holds up the tree of life. Without roots, the lightest breeze could knock over the mightiest tree.'

'That doesn't mean the tree should never grow. I think you misunderstand me.'

'No, I understand you perfectly. You are caught in the quicksand of materialism. But I know that material things are a blockage to the workings of the soul.'

'Change doesn't need to be about materialism,' he replies, growing tired of this metaphysical drivel. 'Change can be a search for truth. Scientists try to find out how the world works, and how we can make it better. Do you think knowledge destroys the soul?'

'The closer you look at the world with your microscopes and telescopes, the further your eyes will be from the truth of the soul. The soul rises higher than the material world and its truths are beyond the instruments of your scientists.'

'And where is all your evidence for this 'truth'?''

‘You are here.’

He had not expected this answer. They stare each other down.

‘If you want the spirits to help you,’ continues the sangoma, ‘you must give up your belief that the world of God and the ancestors and the spirits is separate from the world of earth. After all, your mind exists, and you can hardly say it is separate from the world.’

‘I won’t pretend to agree with you. There has never been any evidence of spirits affecting anything on earth. And my mind is not a “spirit”, it’s a bunch of nerve cells knocking around in my skull.’

‘You are missing the point. The universe is one thing. The spirits are part of this world, not some other faraway place. And they work *through* the world, not *on* the world. You work *through* your body, not *on* your body. Besides, where belief in the ancestors dies, so do their powers. Once the *enas* of the dead are forgotten, they go to the land of Forever-Night. The ancestors of you whiteys do not linger long: they are quickly forgotten. But find any place where there is faith, and you will find the miracles that your science cannot. I know – I have seen them with my own eyes.’

He must humour this crack-pot, who has undoubtedly been smoking too much DP. Why does she not just get to the point?

She smiles crookedly. ‘You want me to get to the point, *umuntu umhlope?*’

She rises and leads him through another covered doorway, this time into a tiny, windowless hut. From the walls hang grotesque masks, animal skins and stuffed leather pouches. From the low ceiling hang bunches of herbs and pieces of bone. Arranged on the floor is an orderly multitude of mutis, most of them unidentifiable, but among them are dried

locusts and spiders, sloughed snake-skins, balls of animal fat, crystals, bones, feathers, barks, roots, leaves, teeth, skulls and bits of dried flesh.

The sangoma removes her power-suit, beneath which she wears nothing but a petticoat and strings of feathers, beads, bones and fur pouches. David cannot help but notice, through the half-light, her blunt breasts, narrow waist and thick thighs. She shakes her braids and the cowries mutter in the dark. 'Sit.'

They sit face-to-face, separated by the spread of muti. She stares at him. Her eyes reflect the thin light from the cracks in the entrance behind him. She examines his face with her fingertips, like a blind woman.

After much deliberation she opens an old shoe-polish tin and removes a pinch of snuff. She snorts from her fingers, sneezes violently, and repeats the process until she is gasping for breath. Her eyes steadily lose focus. Her jaw drops open and incomplete sounds start from deep in her throat. She beats the floor with a stick, striking about as if blind. What is she searching for?

Her gaze turns onto him, her eyes both focused and dreamy, a look he has seen before: Anton in his worst stages of schizophrenia. A sweet odour blowing from her body makes him rigid with fear; he feels exposed, in danger.

Her face relaxes, then hardens into an entirely different set, as if a new face were speaking from under her skin.

'I was the one who was there,' she says in a new voice, deep, sonorous, careful. It sounds distinctly male.

‘I was the one who was there when Absalom woke to the spirit world. I was the one who brought him before the Sangoma Council. I was the one who sent him on his way to *isithwasa*. It is I who know where he is.’

*Must I speak to this strange possessed voice?* He feels awkward, self-conscious, as if behind this mask the sangoma is smirking at him.

‘Baba, I am looking for this man. Can you help me find him?’

The face pauses, as if waiting for the message to arrive.

‘Yes, I can help you find him. But only if your reasons for seeking him please the spirits.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘Why are you seeking Absalom?’

‘His family has been murdered. He is the next chief of the Thembeke tribe.’

‘*Umuntu umhlope*, you are so self-centred. What I mean is: why is Absalom missing? Why do you need to seek him at all?’

‘I’m not certain. I’ve heard several stories: that he had a moral problem with the Thembeke family, that the gangs or tsotsis or even the Thembeke family itself wanted to kill him. Maybe all of these things. From what I’ve heard, I think he’s afraid. He’s always on the run.’

‘You think Absalom left Fort Campbell because he feared for his safety? You are wrong. Absalom left because he feared for his soul. The sons of the unbelievers had forgotten about their forefathers. Even then, before his training, he could hear the voices of the ancestors, the whispers of the spirits. They were angry: their descendants’ impiousness was leading to their fading away into nothing. So the spirits were leading their people astray,

time after time. First they became the servants of the White government and hated by the true amaXhosa. Then they spent thirty years in battle with the tribes that had come to hate them. They even fought and killed amongst themselves, brother killing brother, nephew killing uncle...'

David groans inwardly. All he wants is directions.

'Perhaps, but he left Johannesburg because someone tried to kill him. I don't think that was a spiritual crisis.'

Again the voice hesitates. The face becomes impatient, hostile.

'You think he left Johannesburg because he was afraid of tsotsis? Again you are wrong. He could feel the money and the material rubbish poisoning his soul. Safety from the gangs was just an excuse to escape his real danger.'

'And Swaziland? He was shot in the chest at close range. That's hardly a *spiritual* danger.'

'You think he left Swaziland because he was shot in the chest? That is the most foolish idea of all. If you don't understand this you will never search for the right reasons, and you will never find him. Listen to me: Absalom was just as likely to be shot in Swaziland as here or anywhere else. He was a gangster. That is how gangsters die. No, he came here because he finally understood the message that the spirits had been whispering in his ear for so long: that he is a sacred soul, that he can live in both this world and the spirit world, that it is his duty to connect the two so that they exist in harmony with *Nkulunkhulu*. That he must become a sangoma.'

'For a long time before the attack he had shown all the signs of someone becoming an *ithwasa*: he had seen his ancestors in dreams and visions and heard their voices in his ear; he

went alone into the bush and dreamt of fighting with wild animals; he felt great pain in his head and chest. He was wild – his hair was knotted and his skin broken; his muscles disappeared from starvation. Then, one day in the bush, the tsotsis found him and shot him in the chest. While he lay on the ground, the life-blood leaking from his wound, his spirit left his body and flew down towards the river. There, on a river-bank of white clay, he saw a great black mamba. He wrestled with the mamba and dragged it to the bottom of the river, where it died. With the strength of this victory his spirit returned to his body. As he breathed the first breath into his bleeding lungs and coughed up flesh and blood, he realised what he had always known in his soul: that he must become a sangoma.'

'He left Swaziland immediately, guided by an old Mutwa spirit. He found me at my home in Nginginghlovu, while I was out in the fields, watching the young boys herd the cattle back towards the kraal. The sun was setting. I saw him limping up the path, leading a black and white goat. He collapsed at my feet and offered me the goat if I would make him a sangoma. I knew from troublesome dreams that I must accept this man as an ithwasa.'

*Right, let's humour this freak.* 'So Absalom is becoming a sangoma?'

'Yes.'

'So to find him, I must... be acting in the interests of the spirits?'

'Yes.'

'And what are those interests?'

'You must believe in them. Then, when the time comes, you will protect them.'

David is silent. A grain of superstition prevents him from lying to this woman, or man. He has never been religious, but he sees no need to take chances with the supernatural.

'Absalom will be my client. All I can promise is that I will carry out his wishes.'

‘You will not persuade him otherwise?’

*If he does not wish to claim his birthright, perhaps...*

‘A lawyer must serve the interests of his client.’

*And the interests of his firm.*

The sangoma deliberates, occasionally pausing to sniff the air violently, as if searching for an elusive scent.

‘The spirits are still uncertain, umlungu. But there is no time to waste. Soon the matter will fall out of our hands.’

‘I mean no to harm to anyone, or any spirits.’

‘Let us hope so.’

In the dim light David stares into the dark smudges of the sangoma’s eyes. They stare back, unwavering. He can suddenly hear the sounds of traffic, people, wind. Where were these sounds until now?

The oddly rigid face twists into a grim smile. ‘Now you want to know how to get to Absalom?’

David nods. *Please get to the point... why all these rhetorical questions?*

‘Listen carefully, umlungu. My time here is nearly over.’

David suddenly notices the trails of sweat running down her chest, the strung tendons and hardened muscles. Her eyes are wide and move in rapid circles. She continues:

‘You must go to the Giant’s Castle and find the bushman’s cave. From there you must find your own path. But to find Absalom you will need more than physical directions. You will need to have faith. And the only way to have faith is to believe in the ancestors that will guide you.’

She is straining, drenched with sweat.

‘Hamba khahle, umuntu umhlope.’

‘Sala khahle baba.’

The sangoma’s face rearranges into her original visage. She empties pent up breath and slumps to the floor, exhausted.

David feels compelled to help her, but she pushes herself up and mops her body with a dirty rag. She dons her power-suit again. ‘That is all, my friend. I hope you have heard what you need to hear.’

‘Thank you, *umuntu umsundu*.’

She chuckles at his elementary Zulu. ‘Let us hope this all comes to some good. There is a great disaster on the horizon. Many spirits are afraid. They know that if you find Absalom, their fate will rest with him. But even if you find the man you seek, the spirits are not sure if he will fulfil his purpose, whether he will choose to save or destroy them. Or whether you will help or hinder him.’

He rises to leave.

‘Two hundred rand,’ she adds as an afterthought.

He pays her and she produces a business card: *Sibongile Zulu, Sangoma*, followed by her mobile number.

‘Just in case you need me.’

Once out of the market, bored of the city streets, he hails a cab back to North Beach. He needs a drink.

Sitting on the top deck of Joe Kools, looking over the beachfront and the ocean, David continues his course of healing by alcohol. Palm trees sway in the onshore breeze and the robust tanned Durban girls suddenly seem more appealing, despite their house-wife hair-styles and Cindy Lauper dress sense carried without a hint of irony. His thoughts return to Georgina in her bed, to Angeline – wherever she is. Once he could have been with either. Now both have heard him lie, have watched his promises crumble at his convenience, and will always keep him at arms-length.

A tall, skinny Indian man sits at David's table and orders a whiskey and coke. They start up a conversation, discussing the pros and cons of the girls strutting up and down the beachfront catwalk. Soon they are rating them from one to ten. A debate arises over the merits of the various races: how does one compare a black girl with a white, a coloured, an Indian? What about Zulu versus Sotho? English versus Afrikaans? Malay versus KhoiSan? North versus South Indian? What standards does one use?

Vijay insists that he can only find Indian and white girls attractive. He cannot see black girls as sexual objects. David laughs: nor are they sexual objects, they are certainly sexual subjects.

'You know what I mean,' insists Vijay.

'Yeah, but I don't agree. I think you need to talk from experience. You can't base your preferences on conjecture.'

'Of course I can: it's a matter of taste. Anyway, the mind of a black woman is too alien for me to truly engage with. I will always be having sex with a stranger.'

'What's wrong with that? Isn't that the opposite of masturbation?'

'Don't talk kuk now...'

‘OK, what if a black woman had been brought up as an Indian, or white for that matter? Would that be better?’

Vijay is perplexed. ‘Look, you know what I mean.’

David lets the matter rest. Racial animosity is no secret in this pressure-cooker of a city.

‘You don’t understand,’ Vijay eventually says. ‘I prefer love over sex.’

They drink away the rest of the afternoon. Vijay is in Durban on business, but he is staying with cousins, as is obligatory for a good Indian son and nephew. He has come to Joe Kools to escape from the incessant feeding and gossip-extracting and judgement of an errant child who has left the community for greener pastures, who is implicitly disintegrating the mortar that binds the remainder together in this hostile African landscape.

After a rapid tropical sunset they set out into the sweltering starless night, to *Mumbai*, the latest Indian nightspot. There, amidst a swirl of silk, twirling under the disco lights and out-dancing the visiting Bollywood starlets and their crowds of imitators, is Gayathrie. Like a cello string she throbs in the dark; a diamond nose-stud and beaded bracelets glitter as she moves. All others look clumsy in comparison.

Vijay is also staring. ‘Not a chance, white-boy. That chick will never touch someone who isn’t rich, driving a serious car, and from a respectable Indian family. You can look but you can never touch.’

*But I can smell*, thinks David. He remembers her smell, the tangerine sky, the low-slung mattress. A smell of cardammon, cinnamon, honey, ash.

Besides, does Vijay know of her other life? Of drugged-up white boys with mental problems? Of psychedelic orgies in burning houses? Of the coils that wind around two

people when serotonin is squeezed from the brain to the last drop? They sit at the bar and watch the dance-floor, a shower of Western, Eastern and hybrid clothing. The drinking turns from serious to incapacitating; unable to distinguish his own motion from that of the floor, David sways towards the dance-floor. He hides behind a cigarette-vending machine and peers around it, spying on his glowing quarry. Men in Sicilian clothing and gold chains surround her like peacocks in mating season. She is blind to their colours, but throws them crumbs of attention, enough to provoke a squabble. She knows each offers a life of chauvinism: cooking and cleaning for the highness of the house, a community that studies her with a back-flipped telescope. They present safety, identity, community, respect, a life handed to her on a silver platter. Much like David's father and this gods-forsaken job.

She spots him and he winks, but her body continues its turn, and her face disappears in the throng. For the first time it occurs to him: what are the odds? What is she doing here? Is this really her?

He is still leaning against the machine, balancing against the shifting floor, when a hand catches his and tugs him through the crowd and out a back door. He is smothered, enveloped, between a brick wall and a line of garbage bins. Gayathrie's face is in his; her arms curl around his neck, pulling him in. They stagger towards his car, where they begin to remove each other's clothes, but he falls asleep before she can remove her ivory silk dress and David wakes with the sunrise, his shirt off and his phone balanced on his chest. On the screen a message: *Another time, another place, till I get to know you. Love Gayathrie.*

It occurs to him through the haze of his hangover: the sangoma might be a wholesale charlatan, or she might be fooling herself into believing her own claims, or (at least as a logical possibility) she was possessed by another sangoma and communicated with the fading

selves of the dead and the spirits of nature. He has dreamed of the path to the cave; he has dreamed of exploding guinea fowl; he has dreamed of visitors from another world descending to visit, to observe. What would their findings be? If they looked at his skin? If they looked under his skin?

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## CHAPTER 11--DRAKENSBURG

The deserted track leading into the Giant's Castle Nature reserve follows the contours of the foothills, along slopes of green summer grass and through stands of ancient forest, sometimes descending to the bottom of the valley where there runs a clear stream, still to be touched by the early summer sun. The Drakensberg rise before him, the gigantic ridge of the dragon's back, the bare peaks glistening in the first light.

David paces slowly – he has no clear destination in mind. On a weekday morning he is the only person in these mountains, a dot of red on a pointillist canvas of green. The sun finds its way down the valleys. Insects emerge from the undergrowth and buzz in the air; the day-birds swoop down to catch them. A curious honey-guide lands on a branch blocking the path, chirping and watching David with a cocked head. As he approaches, it glides away, coming to rest in the crown of a giant ouhout tree. It turns its head, fixing its eyes on him. David continues down the path, the bird gliding ahead in shallow parabolas from one bush to the next.

The valley splits where two tributaries converge in a rocky pool. David stops to drink. This is the end of the track; from here it crosses the river and returns to the base camp. He begins to pick his way across the river to return along the other side. The bird swoops

across his path, blocking him. A strange understanding dawns: from the little eyes of the bird he imagines a twinkle of recognition, as if the sangoma were laughing at him. Suddenly he has no desire to rush back to the deserted camp and his filthy car. After all, he is under no compulsion, under no observation. The bird describes a semi-circle, landing on a branch of a yellow-wood that guards the entrance to the tangled forest that covers one of the tributaries. There is no path here; he must follow the bird by hopping from rock to rock up the stream, the water gurgling beneath him. The arboreal temple on either side, moss-hung and fern-carpeted, is cool and damp and smells of rotting leaves.

The exertion is welcome after a week of sitting behind his steering wheel or flattened by a hangover. His thoughts drift freely between the strange events that have brought him here, directionless, and the fact that his inner compass is also broken. His mind's eye alights on the symbol of infinity, the figure-of-eight whose two halves touch at a single point, never to intersect. He thinks of smells: Georgina's flowers and sugar, Angeline's aloes and dust, Gayathrie's spices and honey. Patrice's raw molasses. Perhaps Absalom has been running for the same reason as he has, keeping the short circles of his life from intersecting. Why has he ended up here anyway? Is he trying to prove himself to Simon? To his father? *To the holy mother-fucking ghost*, he swears aloud. Is it Capetonian claustrophobia? Is it to escape the hot nights when Georgina comes home late and he is lying on the sheets, stoned and sweating tequila?

He passes the tree-line and emerges, blinking, into a rocky chasm, the stream now an icy trickle between freshly cut boulders. The air is thin and cool, but the distant cirrus clouds no closer. Still following the excitable bird, he constructs his own version of Absalom's story:

*Absalom is woken by voices outside his hut. He is a young boy, not yet thirteen, lying on a straw mat in the dwelling of the chief's nephew, where now only his mother – no Government – lives. His father was not long ago killed by forces he doesn't understand. His mother is already on her long walk to the water, where the Mnanzi river still runs clear as a baby's eyes through the slopes of the Fort Campbell valley. The cows low, restless. It is time for their release into the veld. Absalom can hear his driver outside, already dressed to leave. Soon Absalom will once again be sitting in the battered old Mercedes, bouncing down the dirt-track towards the school in Umtata, while the other boys remain in the valley, herding their cattle to the higher pastures or practicing with their katis on doves and starlings. He has considered it many times, come close a few, but on this morning he has resolved to do it: feign sickness. Thando, his driver's wife, steps into the doorway and shouts at him to wake up. He turns over on his mat, groaning and clutching his stomach.*

*He spends the day walking through the tall elephant grass, the bush, the open veld. He feels free: no lessons, no teachers, no silly suits. He plays a game of soccer with the other boys. Later that afternoon he wanders down the long green bank of the hill they live on, towards the river, where quiet pools hide beneath the extended arms of the trees. Once he reaches the water the temptation of secret places just around the corner proves too much. He makes his way upstream, hopping in and out of the water and over rocks, disturbing lugubrious frogs and lizards sunning themselves in the patches of light that make their way through the canopy of leaves.*

*He stops at a deep pool overhung by willow trees. He is far from home territory: even with his friends – on Saturday morning expeditions - he has never explored this far up the river. The valley-walls are steeper here, the bush wilder. He sits, leaning against a tree trunk, wondering why his father disappeared, why his mother is so short-tempered, why he has to be the exception in his umlungu school-suit and the Mercedes. The more he attended school the less he trusted it. Reading about the Voyages of Discovery and The Great Trek and the Flag Question (which umlungu, the question asked, had a rightful claim to the land?) never told him about where his people had journeyed from, what claims they had. At the least the river remains, a common thread between him and his ancestors, between him and the earth.*

*On the opposite bank, oblivious to his presence, he spots a thin dark-skinned ntombi washing her family's clothes. He is enamoured with her wide eyes and long lashes, her short pointed breasts, the elegant cast of her back. She is too young to make his wife, but not too young to court. He observes her from behind lamenting trails of willow-leaves and contemplates her movements, captivated. Her skirt, already short, is lifted by her repetitive washing motion to expose strips of chocolate thigh, twist of waist and bounce of breast.*

*Absalom – whenever he can evade school - takes to watching her in the mornings, studying her movements as she treads over half-submerged rocks, as she wrings the wet clothes between her hands. He discovers that her name is Nkosinathi and that she is from a scion of the Mnanzi family.*

*One day he summons the courage to step from behind his cover of leaves. She stops mid-squeeze, her hands dripping. He stammers; she paints a smile over her grimace of fear. She knows what he is: an impimpi from down the river, a godless, merciless traitor. What a*

*change from the self-righteous pleas of the mothers and grandmothers to be a good daughter, to become a good wife, a good Xhosa serving-woman to her future husband.*

*He courts her in secret; they have clandestine meetings in a circle of prickly-pear trees through which no-one would walk or see. With their hot breath they tickle each others' ears.*

*Seasons pass. His family expects him to take a wife and suspect that he has already taken a lover. One day, as they are bathing, Big Mandla comes walking up the valley. He sees them from the top of a nearby koppie and comes thundering down, brandishing his knobkierrie. He bursts through the wall of trees and beats Absalom and turns to Nkosinathi. Seeing the blows against her soft back and her tender legs sends Absalom into a rage. He attacks his uncle with tooth and claw, like a wild animal - before the red mist clears the old man is dead. Nkosinathi looks on, horrified, then turns and runs. He never sees her again. Absalom returns Big Mandla's body to the chief's kraal and tells a lie about his demise – that he was set upon by *tstotsis*. He drinks. He cannot think. Eventually he moves to Johannesburg, where he can drown his sorrows away from prying and accusing eyes. Meanwhile, Nkosinathi's love has turned to scorn – the time-weary women were right. She must not play with the boys from down the river. She tells them the true story of Big Mandla's murder. A mark is placed on Absalom's life.*

*But life in the crowded shebeens of Soweto goes on: Absalom meets a beautiful nurse from Baragwanath - Xoliswa – with mocha skin and an hourglass figure. Together they spin through the shebeens and dance-halls and she slowly heals his wounds, until the hit-squad finds him and avenges Big Mandla's death in a hail of bullets. Absalom is lucky to survive. Xoliswa pleads with him to leave Soweto, to give up his dangerous ways. Pantsula fo' life, he*

*growls. She threatens to leave him. After a bitter argument he agrees to move to Swaziland, but will not quit the gang.*

*On the border, in the lonely bush, Xoliswa is a desirable woman in a land of desiring men. One day, as they walk through the veld, the cicadas singing under the pepper-trees, a crowd of gangsters surround them, shoot Absalom in the chest, and circle Xoliswa, slashing at the bushes with their pangas.*

*Xoliswa survives the ordeal, but once again Absalom is persecuted by his thoughts, his head tight as a drum. The world becomes taut, distanced. He hears voices whispering at the edge of his hearing; he denies himself food, shelter, clothing. He clings to the edge of life. Crawling through the bush, almost the animal that the voices claim he is, he encounters an old man who has met madness before. Devote your life to the spirits, he says, and you will find forgiveness.*

*Absalom accepts this advice, but his fervour unsettles his instructor. His spiritual mania can have only one match – one whom has also encountered loss, rejection, disgrace. One whom has not sought recluse in his delusions, but deep in the mountains of his ancestors, of the brown people who were there before black, before white, before history.*

David considers various elaborations of this fantasy, while on each side the cliffs grow steeper. He stops at a waterfall shadowed by twisted yellow-woods, a crescent of rock over which a film of water falls like a curtain. Amidst the ferns and mosses that grow under the spray of the falls is a single vermillion disa-flower, a bashful exhibitionist. He sheds his clothes and splashes about, parting the curtain of water with his cupped hands. His honey-

guide companion becomes increasingly restless and soon erupts into a frenzy of noise and flapping, circling through a gap in the trees, urging him on.

An eland, the largest and most sacred of antelope, stands at the top of a grassy slope, at the foot of a sheer cliff. It is immobile, watching, its metre-long scimitar horns turned towards David like two black divining rods sensing evil vibrations. As David approaches, the beast ambles off. Where it stood David stops: in the middle of the rock-wall, three hundred feet above him, is a darkness, a shadow the size of a small man. His guide shoots up into the air and hovers around the indentation, then plummets down and circles his head, brushing his ears with its wing-tips. *Is this it?*

He picks his way up the cliff, a wary insect on a rugged wall. The honey guide flutters around him, alighting on hidden foot-holds and flapping at cracks in which his fingers can gain purchase. He finally heaves his body into the shallow dent in the rock, barely large enough for his crouched figure. He perches on the edge. The cool breeze whips off his sweat; he wraps his arms around his suddenly cold body. From here the valley of plunging rock and scraggy ravines seems silent, calm. The honey guide, resting on the ledge, stares at him, chirps gently, and disappears into the sky.

At the back of the ledge is a cleft in the rock, the geological aperture to a basalt camera. He squeezes through, into a round, dome-roofed cavern. Once his pupils have dilated to admit the second-hand light, his breath catches in his throat, ants erupt beneath his skin: from floor to ceiling the cave is covered in rock paintings, ochre herds of antelope - dreamily proportioned with long legs and thin snouts - ripple over the surface; stately eland dance in semi-circles; clans of hunters march to war or flee from the advancing armies of the

black man to the east and the white man to the west, shown marching with their spears or guns raised. Layer painted over layer, silver threads connecting rampant predators with bleeding prey, strange monsters, half-man, half-beast. He notices, on the far side of the cave, the entrance to a narrow tunnel that leads further into the rock. A geometric shape has been carved above the entrance: a square, inside which are two side-facing triangles, their bases connected by two lines. This cannot be a bushman engraving; it's too angular, a cipher rather than a vision. On either side of the tunnel is an etching of what appears to be a giant grasshopper, antennae up, guarding the entrance. He feels like he is being observed in the act of trespassing upon holy ground.

Hesitant but undeterred, he inches down the tunnel. The last remnants of sunlight quickly fade and he makes his way forward by torch-light. The tunnel twists and turns, sometimes opening into little caves, sometimes so tight that he must crawl along the dusty floor or through damp and muddy crevices. After some time (he cannot even estimate how long, subterranean time feeling somehow different) the walls of the tunnel fall away and the echoes of his footfalls reverberate from distant rock-faces. He waves his beam of light around: he is in a large cavern punctured with stalagmites and stalactites. Some of the formations have joined to form a rough semi-circle of eerie white pillars. In the middle of this ghostly temple is a pool of black water, its surface reflecting the electric light of the torch. He imagines white fish swimming in there, with oversized heads and long teeth and skin-covered eyes. Evolved.

He looks for a way forward, skirting the edge of the pool. A fish breaks the surface of the water, sending out an expanding halo of ripples and causing David to jump, his skin to shiver. He searches the cavern for another passage, the path to somewhere, but soon returns

to his starting point. All he has found are hundreds, thousands of bushman paintings. He drops his day-pack and slumps to the ground, deflated. Now what? Should he wait here for something to happen, for Absalom to appear out of a rock? He checks his watch. How long must he wait, exactly? The torch-batteries are waning.

He switches off the light. The blackness is absolute. He sees spinning patterns of after-image; the rods and cones of his retina dance: squares, triangles, circles, a spiralling chorus of daisy-wheels. He feels for the pool with his hands and drinks from the silent water, fresh and cold. His hand does not touch the bottom. He immerses his arm up to the shoulder: nothing.

Will he turn back, tail between his legs, or will he push on, at least try? That the pool leads somewhere is, after all, a possibility. Muttering curses at his employers, the gods, cold water, the mountains, the mothers of the mountains and the dogs of the mothers of the mountains, he undresses and inches himself into the frozen mineral martini. The pool is deep and bell-shaped, a flooded cavern, much larger than its surface suggests; his feet feel no bottom. He propels himself down until his hands touch rock, and trails his fingertips over the algae-slimed surface. Near the bottom of the pool he punches into empty space, the entrance to a narrow tunnel. He returns to the surface and gasps for breath, treading water in the dark.

He dives again and feels his way up the tunnel. The passage narrows and an icy current brushes against his face. Claustrophobia's noose tightens. He tries to turn around, but the tunnel is too tight. Trying to wiggle backwards results only in futile thrashing about, a waste of precious oxygen. Panicking, he propels himself up the tunnel, pushing against the sides with all four limbs.

He bursts into cold musty air and gasps for breath. He explores the new space with wavering hands. It is little more than a bubble, barely large enough for an outstretched arm and the sound of his teeth clattering. The underwater tunnel continues at the other end. If he waits here for too long he will use up all the oxygen. A trick Max taught him for moments of panic: he sings to himself – *Ti-i-ime is on my side, yes it is!*

The *bittereinder* in David forces him to plunge into the water again and pull himself forward. His body aches with cold. A strange euphoria mixes with his fear. Death presents itself: an invisible matador waving a black velvet cape. His thoughts accelerate wildly as his animal brain tries in vain to fight or flee. He begins to regret his false promises (Did he love Angeline in spite of the forced secrecy, or because of it, because of the inherent *naughtiness* of it all? He never asked himself before he gave her the answer), the squandered affection (with Georgina he had always suspected that their greedy serpent of self-destruction would eventually bite its own tail), the tangle of lies that he has presented to everyone, anyone, and the velvet curtain of death undulates in the dark.

He rises vertically into the rock, his shoulders banging against the narrowing walls of the tunnel. His skin is numb; he feels disembodied, floating. He prays (even though he has never considered the divine as anything more than a lie and a cheat) that all can hear his last request for forgiveness: his family, his friends, his lovers, the world. Ahead he sees a light, at first just a point, then swelling into a shimmering doorway, shining down white rays. He has left his body; he floats up, the light engulfing him. He sees glistening stars, a wheel of blue, a halo of green. He gasps for breath.

His vision slowly clears. He is floating in a pool; bulrushes hang over his head. The calls of weavers and mossies chirp through the sound of a breeze hissing through the

bulrushes. A red dragonfly circles the pool and returns to its perch on a bent reed. The sun shines in his eyes. He treads water, breathing.

The pool is at the bottom of deep basin, grass-carpeted and boulder-littered. Black cliffs crowned with sharp rocks circle the fertile. Streams cut the cliffs and trickle down to meet at the dragon-fly heaven in which David is floating.

He emerges from the water and lies on a flat-topped boulder to dry off. He has nothing here: clothes, day pack and phone have all have been left beside the inky home of the imaginary ghost-fish. On the mountainside a herd of klipspringers graze peacefully, ignoring him. He must remember to breathe, as if to make sure he is really out of the water. Time, to David, seems weightless, without inertia. His body feels light, high, like a plastic packet on an urban thermal. The warmth of the rock beneath his belly and the sun on his back lulls him into a light doze.

He is woken by a strange clicking sound, perhaps a nervous bushbuck or vervet monkey. He sits up. He has rarely seen a place so beautiful and so untouched. There is an energy here (vibrational? magnetic? ectoplasmic?) that makes the valley seem like a gigantic resonator for some cosmic banjo. His ears ring; his teeth feel ready to bite. He stretches his stiff muscles and listens for the source of the noise, but hears nothing beyond the drone of insects and the hiss of air moving through reeds. Behind the reeds and the boulders a ring of trees circle the pool. They are thick-trunked and old, but their branches are low and twisted, hovering over the water. The surface of the pool sparkles in the midday sunlight, but beyond the shallows, where the water is as clear as Stolichnaya on ice, he can see only an inky depth.

*Where to now?*

His question is answered by the sight of a man crouched on one of the boulders in the shade of a twisted wild fig tree. He wears nothing but a loincloth and strings of beads around his neck. His hair and beard are white, his skin is deeply lined, leathery, toffee-coloured; beneath its collapsing folds his face is finely featured, with a sharp little nose, high cheekbones and thin laughing eyes. The old man stands up, leaning on a stick and groaning in complaint. He appraises David silently. David drops to his haunches, embarrassed by his nakedness. The man laughs, a dry cackle like twigs breaking, and throws a buckskin skirt in David's direction.

'Thanks,' says David, unsure of how to greet such a strange apparition. The old man responds in slow and broken English. His voice is thin and brittle, as if his throat is made of papyrus.

'Yes, my friend. Welcome to my valley.'

David wraps the skin around his hips and ties the leather strap. He could be a primordial man now, a maverick Flintstone on a supernatural mission. The old man beckons. David clammers over the boulders towards him.

'My name is !Xi', says the old man, offering his hand. He says his name like the high note on an African xylophone: a pop of throat, a click of tongue, the musical *i* of his voice.

'David.'

They shake hands in the African style. David is still wary; !Xi smiles as if he is withholding Christmas presents from a child.

'Follow me, my friend.'

!Xi climbs down from the boulder and leads him up a footpath through the trees. They keep near one of the streams that feeds the pool, through patches of damp and moss-

hung forest and up the grassy slope of the valley. They meet the stream at the base of one of the great cliffs. The water cascades down the cliff-face in a series of waterfalls, to collect in a natural bowl of rock at the bottom. Water gushes from the side of the bowl and flows across the mouth of a cave, creating an ankle-deep moat. In this thin layer of water are two rounded rocks. !Xi sits on one, stretching his thin legs with loud groans and protestations, and invites David to sit on the other. In this strange position, with their feet immersed in the cool flowing water, they have a commanding view of the valley.

!Xi locks eyes with David. Between the wrinkled slits of !Xi's eyelids hazel pupils gaze out, watery and old in appearance, but dryly humorous in expression. David feels he is being laughed at, but gives nothing away, smiling stiffly in response.

'You have a beautiful home here,' says David, looking out over the valley.

'Thank you. I also like it here.'

'You don't seem surprised to see me.'

'Surprised? No. Not surprised.'

'Then I suppose you knew-'

'Sh, my friend.' !Xi has a lyrical accent, as if he is used to reciting poetry rather than speaking. Yet he struggles with the language, as if it is many years since he has used his voice. Words stick in his throat, sentences splinter and emerge in pieces.

'There is no... hurry... here,' he continues, 'You are my, my, guest. Why don't you tell me - a little - about the, person, yourself.'

David obliges, providing !Xi with a brief autobiography: where he was born, how he grew up, what he does at work. When he spells it out in such terms, his life seems so simple,

his concerns so trivial and self-indulgent. !Xi listens attentively, silently. David ends his story with an explanation of how he arrived here, in !Xi's secret retreat, naked and confused.

'Do you know,' says !Xi, staring again into David's eyes, 'that you are the first white man, person... ever to walk. In this valley'.

David shrugs. What must he say to that?

'Do you think you can help me find the man I'm looking for? Was the sangoma right?'

!Xi rises from his rock, rubbing his stiff knees. 'Not what they used to be, my legs,' he says, limping into the cave. David can hear his voice echoing from inside the mountain.

'It's from standing up. All night. To paint on this wall. Not good, also, my eyes, from looking hard in the dark at wet colours.'

He stops to stare at a wall covered, like the others, in countless paintings. 'From very long ago times, my ancestors learn to paint from... the bushman that live... in these mountains, before the Bantu or the White man were even... born. Over all these years we live, paint here, safe from - outside world. Now, nearly dead, my people, and only one, stay in the valley, to paint these walls and live. The old way. Fifty years since I come to this valley. As... apprentice. When the time come, another apprentice to learn my knowledge. The spirit of the river will call.'

'Is Absalom your apprentice?'

'Ah, that boy. The spirit he send him to me. First I thought he was my apprentice. His magic very powerful. He can talk easily to the spirits. But the river-spirit came to me. To let him go, told me. Other tasks to achieve in this life, that he has.'

'Am I your apprentice?'

!Xi chuckles at the suggestion, his loose skin shifting over his body. 'No, you are not my apprentice. I am the... last... children of the Tracker Star. The spirits tell me that, that when I am... gone the knowledge of, the bushmen, will finally die and be... thrown, like ash. Over the land. You are called here by the spirits, but you are no apprentice. Only a witness.'

David rises and joins !Xi in staring at the exhibition of paintings, some centuries old, some millennia old, some from distant eons, different worlds. On a ledge David sees !Xi's painting tools: little horn-tips filled with pigment, rabbit-hair brushes. In a corner is !Xi's bed - a mattress of dry grass and a blanket of sheep-skin. Beyond that, in a hollow near the back of the cave, lie !Xi's personal possessions, to David's eyes a pitiful sight: some scraps of dried meat and herbs, a large plastic bag of mielie meal (half-full), a single pair of denims (torn), a pile of animal skins.

!Xi explains (haltingly, in loops and broken chronology, frustrated by his limited English) that once a year he swims through the watery gate – the only way in or out of the valley - and walks to Kokstad, a hundred kilometres away. There he sells his furs and uses the money to buy enough mielie meal to last another year. For the journey he wears his single pair of trousers. There are still some bushmen living near Kokstad, either hidden amongst the Zulus or as half-breeds, despised and persecuted. Very few now live by the old ways. To openly be a bushman is to invite the Bantu to beat you to death and burn your house and rape your wife and daughters and then steal your goats. That is why he must be alone, to live by the old ways, to be closer to the spirits, to be closer to god.

The Bantu and the White man have tried to break into this valley. But the Bantu do not swim; they could not break through the shield of water. They believe that in the cave of pillars the bushmen vanish into the rock like spirits of the mountains. The white man had

hovered above in helicopters, like robotic birds of prey, but never landed (!Xi uses the term *robot* freely, strangely).

!Xi tells David about the eternal hatred of the Bantu for the cattle-thieving bushmen, about the trophy-hunting white men from across the sea who would hang the bushman head beside the head of the wildebeest and the quagga, how the bushmen have lived here for a hundred thousand lives of men, how in the lifetime of the brown people the arrival of the black man was but a breath, the white man no more than a shiver. A thousand years ago the Bantu moved down from the Congo, seeking new lands for their precious cattle. Five hundred years later the white man arrived in his ships, seeking fresh water, seeking meat. In the world-wide war waged between black and white, the brown people were forgotten, caught between the heads of two charging buffalo, smashed to pieces. A whole race to be erased from history like a sin from a guilty conscience: uncomfortably.

*You will be remembered in books*, says David, trying to console the old man, thinking of Lourens van der Post and National Geographic magazine articles.

*Yes*, says !Xi. He cannot read, but he knows what books are. *Like history, like the dead.*

Words continue to tumble from !Xi's mouth as if he has been holding back a dam of them, a huge reservoir of words saved up over the years, finally bursting. David's ear is a crack in the retaining wall through which the dam breaks. !Xi goes on to tell him about the Bantu camping in the Cave of Pillars, waiting for the bushmen to emerge. They would capture the rain-making shamans and sell them to the King Moshoeshoe and King Dingaan – the bushmen were considered the most powerful magicians in the African world, and fetched a high price. The Bantu sangomas would assemble in the cave and gather their powerful

spirits around them for protection. They wanted justice for the theft of their people's cattle. That is what they called the string of caves: the place of justice. The name is carved into the entrance: the two triangles of right and wrong bound by the chains of tribal law.

David asks about the giant grasshoppers carved into the wall. !Xi stares into the empty space above the valley for some time before answering, as if calling up some distant memory. He answers David, again in fractured and hesitant words, which to David's ears, now accustomed to !Xi's manner of speech, flow with their own staccato rhythm:

'The sangomas believed that the bushmen could still contact the First People, the race that was born of the Great Mother and the Tree of Life in the depths of time. They looked just like people look today, except their skin was red, like the plains of Africa. In those days there was no black or white or brown, only red. There was no suffering or evil, only harmony.'

'One day Za-Ha-Rrellel was born, the first evil man, who had the ability to shape iron ore to his wishes. His first creation was a giant grasshopper made of metal – a robot – with dragonfly wings and a metal tail with a crystal sting full of dark green poison. This was his first weapon of conquest - he wanted to conquer the sun, the moon and the earth - and its first task was to kill his own mother, despite her pleas for mercy. Then he built the greatest empire the world had ever seen, where all had a life of luxury and ease. Men lived in golden huts that moved from place to place according to their owner's wish. Metal robots served their human masters in every way, tilling the land, preparing their meals, even lifting their food to their lazy mouths. Za-Ha-Rrellel even created a race of mindless obedient slaves to do the bidding of the enthralled First People.'

‘The Tree of Life then said to the Earth mother: “Our children are depriving all life of its purpose, living selfish and useless lives. Za-Ha-Rrellel has dared to create creatures of metal and flesh. He thinks he’s a god, a creator. We must teach that evil child a lesson. We must destroy our first effort and begin again.”’

‘They sent down floods and lightening and hailstones, drowning half of the mighty empire. But this did not deter Za-Ha-Rrellel. On gigantic rafts the First People built new cities, and here continued to live lives even more extravagant and lazy. Golden bowls of beer would always float at arms length; people would sit on living mats that floated above the ground. People became so lazy they were barely able to move. Za-Ha-Rrellel then decided to complete his domination of the universe by stealing the Earth Mother from the Tree of Life. For this he created a vast army of giant metal insects, which he sent to the spirit world. They tore the Earth mother from the Great Tree’s arm-like branches and bore her back to the Emperor’s palace. But the radiant heat of the Earth Mother burnt up the First People and her anger shook the world into violent earthquakes, sinking whole continents under seas of fire. All of the First People, Za-Ha-Rrellel included, died, with the exception of Amarava the Singer, who wedded the strongest of the sub-human slaves, Odu, to give birth to the Second People, who inhabit the earth to this day.’

‘Some of the sangomas believed that a remnant of the First People had survived. Legends whispered that they were living in the spirit world, or were carried away by a great metal shark that swam across the sea, towards the stars, where they still lived. The sangomas believed that the bushmen could still reach the First People using their magical powers. That is why the grasshoppers were carved at the entrance to the caves of the bushmen: to warn them that their old magic would only bring them harm. The First People were of the past.

The bushmen were of the past. They must bow to the wishes of the Bantu: flee or become their servants.'

While !Xi spills pent-up verbiage the afternoon sun sinks behind the cliffs, throwing the valley into shadow. They sit in the mouth of the cave, watching a pair of black eagles glide in the still air, miles up, dots circling a closing loop of blue. While the swifts and swallows catch the last insects and the air slowly cools, !Xi plucks sad melodies from a little musical bow and tells David the stories of the bushmen – stories of the sun and the moon and the eland and the badger, stories of kings and hunters and gods and demons and ancestors. He tells David how he finds his pigments and makes his brushes, how the Tracker Star that follows the moon told his ancestors that they would die, only to be reborn.

The sun, from somewhere beyond the mountains, licks the sky with a red tongue. The first calls of the night-birds hoot from the slopes of the valley. !Xi makes a fire in the entrance of the cave (re-lit from a coal he had preserved from the previous night, the old way). From an ember he lights a small black pipe. Venus appears beside its sliver of moon.

'I must soon join my ancestor, the Tracker Star. Like the old animals that climb up to the high pastures where animals are young forever, so I will climb the mountain and die to be reborn. You will be the last person to see me in this body.'

David's skin shivers. !Xi hands him a thick kaross of sheepskin and leads him into the cave. Deep inside is a natural basin of rock, into which water drips from the ceiling. Bunches of leaves and seeds float in the water, giving it the colour of a tiger's-eye.

'Drink this water,' says !Xi, 'it is pure. The spirit of the mountain.'

David cups his hands and drinks from them.

‘It is bitter.’

‘Yes. Life is bitter.’

!Xi takes his turn to drink. ‘Let us look at the paintings.’

!Xi explains the meanings of the paintings. The eland are for good luck in the hunt and plentiful food. Groups of hunters chasing wildebeest are a celebration of a kill. Fat-rumped women are a sign of fertility. Tall black figures with spears pointed west are the merciless mutwa-hunters of the Bantu. The strange white lines that connect people and animals are lines of energy. A doubled-up shaman with a halo over his neck – his spirit is leaving his body.

Without warning David’s stomach contracts and he stumbles in a surge of nausea; his vision alternately blurs and sharpens. In the dying light the cave wall shimmers - or appears to shimmer - like a curtain blowing in a breeze, a curtain across a door that spans more than one space or time. David looks at !Xi, who suddenly seemed suffused with power, his age falling from him like a sloughed skin, his body glowing yellow in the dim light. !Xi presses a finger against the wall. The surface ripples like a stone dropped in water. The figures on the surface move, dance, turn to beckon. !Xi presses the wall again, this time immersing his hand in the rock, playing with its rippling surface. He leans forward and disappears into the wall like a diver sinking into a rainbow oil-slick, leaving behind him waves of pictures sliding over each other, hunting, chasing, feasting, being possessed by demons.

After some hesitation David presses his fingertips against the rock. It gives in like soft rubber. He pushes through the barrier to find himself miles up in the air. Beneath them – for !Xi floats beside him – the white-tipped peaks of the Drakensberg glimmer in the starlight. They swoop down, !Xi leading, rushing towards the Natal Midlands, over charcoal

valleys and hilltops of glistening sugar-cane. Far ahead is Durban, a colony of lights on a distant horizon. They reach the brooding sea. !Xi grabs David's wrist and leads him south, over long beaches and dark lagoons, banana plantations and jungle. In the distance he sees the light of a single paraffin lamp. They plummet like hawks: there, sitting beneath a banana tree, smoking a rolled cigarette and waving a shotgun around in the dark, is a broad-shouldered figure framed by long dreadlocks. They loop around him like bats; the man's shoulders shrug as if by reflex. He sweeps his gun around; he can hear them. His face calms. He seems to relax until his eyes fly open and two little red balls stare at David from an alien face. He fires the gun at them, harmlessly.

!Xi guides him back up and towards the mountains, where they fly straight through the mountainside and emerge in the cave. David tumbles to the floor. !Xi is seated beside the fire, gazing out into the darkness, silent. David composes himself and sits beside the old man. For some time they say nothing; the valley speaks for itself with its bush-sounds and lamenting wind.

'Is that Absalom?' asks David, 'The man we saw on our flight... dream?'

!Xi shifts an ember around with a stick, sending an inverse drizzle of sparks floating into the night sky.

'That is him.'

A thin mist envelopes the mountains, through which pale stars glow. !Xi does not speak, but David understands his intentions. The old man walks up and down the walls of the cave, his ancient face breathing against spirits, gods and demons. He carefully arranges his horn-tips and paint and his collection of brushes. David stares into the fire, overcome by a sudden tiredness. When he wakes from his daze !Xi is gone, but a crescent moon has risen

over the tops of the mountains, followed closely by a bright Venus. In the pale moonlight, shrouded by mist, he sees the old man hobbling up the mountain, wrapped in a thick *kaross*. Later that night a brilliant light appears over the valley. David rushes outside to see, but the light blinds his cave-eyes then disappears, as if the door to a bright place had been opened and shut again, leaving the world even darker than before.

He sleeps beside the fire, wrapped in furs. When he wakes the sun has already climbed over the mountains and the valley seems crisp and new. He returns to the pool and sinks down the tunnel, his body limp, descending with the flow of the water. The light from above at first illuminates the walls of the passage, but slowly disappears until he is again in absolute blackness

He finds his way back into the bell-shaped pool. The current sweeps him across the bottom, to a crack in the rock where the water flows out, but he swims upwards, his lungs like two tight fists, and bursts from the water, heaving for breath. He crawls from the pool, too disorientated and breathless to begin searching for his day-pack and his torch, and lies, wet and panting, on the stone floor. It is just as dark and silent as when he left, and he can't help feeling that the valley and the bushman were no more than a dream or a vision, and in reality he had simply been lying all this time on the floor of the cavern, his mind's eye reverberating to the same key as the ancient mountains.

## CHAPTER 12--UMZUMBE

He is rushing down from the mountains towards the sea, the windows of the Landie steamed up. He can barely see through the thick rain. Tall sugar-cane looms on either side of the road. He overtakes trucks that have slowed to a near-standstill, their night-lights glowing in the gloom. He is not sure what happened in the mountains. Perhaps it was the stress, or a drug-induced synapse-misfire. Perhaps it was the constant driving and searching and the nights in strange hotels. Perhaps it was a vision, something in the water. Perhaps his disembodied spirit zoomed around the stratosphere like a bat, a flying manta-ray. He needs rest, sanctuary.

His speculations collapse into spirals, figures of eight, chasing tails. He gives up trying to direct his thoughts; like a marble on a glass table they roll around freely, moving with the slightest touch. A memory: Angeline's nose pressed against his as their last minute ticked by, thirteen years ago. They were under the duvet, locked in his room, the curtains drawn. Rain drummed against the tin roof and the window-panes. Outside his parents were loading the car. Patience stood on the pavement beside her suitcase, waiting for a taxi, dripping. Their last moments were stolen: had they been caught like this it would have sparked a domestic explosion. The sound of his father bellowing his name from outside the

window forced them to hastily dress. They stood together at the door, ready to leave.

Angeline's eyes, the green of a monsoon sea, coveted David's face, as if she would never run her eyes over its contours again. She pressed her body against his chest without releasing his eyes from her gaze.

'Don't let this stupid, mad world take this away. Promise me.'

There was a stern knocking at the door. 'David – what you doing in there?' piped the voice of his mother.

'Coming now!' he shouted, and pulled Angeline closer to him. He whispered into her mouth: 'You and me.'

Patches of sunlight shine through the clouds, illuminating the rain. For some inexplicable reason his mental marble rolls into a party in Camps Bay, into a room crowded with champagne-drunk fashionistas. He and Georgina had slipped off to abuse the facilities and emerged together, hushing and giggling. On entering the lounge with its chattering, flute-holding crowd, David spotted Angeline at the bar, conversing with a middle-aged Armani-wearing agent. She saw him, but turned away, presenting him with her long, tea-coloured back. The feeling was the same as a year before that, when he was crawling through a Hip-Hop party at Mercury Live, feeling sorry for himself, when he thought he saw her, but it was only the way a shadow fell across the face of stranger.

The rain has thinned to a fine drizzle and wet fog blankets the sugar-cane outside. Inside the car the windows are still steamed up. Why not simply go home, tell Simon that Absalom is dead or has fled the country? The client, the promotion and the money seem like empty presents on a false birthday, hardly enough to propel him through this humid torrent.

Nonetheless, he wants to see Absalom for himself, to meet the survivor of the family, the refugee, the lost child, the pantsula. On the passenger seat, balanced on a pile of accumulated chip-packets and crushed Red Bull cans, is his single photograph of Absalom, his jaw clenched, his heavy brows set, defensive.

Under the diamond sky he reaches the sea and turns south, along the coastal road, past lagoons and beaches. He recognises the landscape from his dream or flight, except now it is lit by a weak sun shining through the clouds and refracting through a billion raindrops. He passes holiday towns with their face-brick bungalows and life-saving towers and holiday makers swimming in the warm rain, the air a tropical broth. Further south he enters a country of banana plantations, wide estuaries and jungle-covered headlands. On a sudden impulse (perhaps, after all, his internal compass is not entirely broken) he turns down a dirt track that leads through lines of banana trees. He reaches a gate: *Private Property, Trespassers Will Be Shot*. Hardly inviting. The fact – sad but true – is that in this remote corner of the world, where time snoozes in an armchair while the cities rush and panic, his melanin deficiency might exempt him from such high-calibre chastisement. He opens the gate and drives on.

The roughly-hewn track terminates at a fence surrounding another grove of trees. He leaves the air-conditioned car and immediately feels crushed by the heat. The passing rain has offered no relief. The damp air shimmers, as if he were moving underwater, and is saturated with the odours of wet earth and the sweet fragrance of banana blossoms. Beads of sweat spring up on his skin. He climbs over the barbed-wire fence and continues his search on foot through the tight rows of trees. An alien-green light shines through the giant leaves above him. A fist-sized water spider hides in a bunch of banana blossoms. A flock of hadidas fly somewhere above the trees, crying, but under the leaves there is a heavy silence,

broken only by his ragged breathing and the occasional chirp of hidden insects. Sweat runs down his face, into his eyes. He unbuttons his shirt (beach-sand yellow, strawberry red and Caribbean blue floral patterns split down his chest), but it does not help. Time limps on, crippled by the heat.

A cooler breeze wafts under the oven of leaves, lifting some of his sweat. It carries the scent of the ocean and the sharp smell of Boxer tobacco. Soon, through a gap in the rows of trees, he sees a blue line, where sky meets sea. He emerges from the long corridor of trees into sudden light and vast space. Before him a jungle-covered slope descends into the grey-green sea. Sheltered by the overhanging leaves of the last row of banana trees is a small shack of plastic and corrugated iron. Beside the shack, sitting on a dirty lawn-chair, smoking a roll-up cigarette, is Absalom.

David stops in his tracks. The man has heard him approach, and has his eyes fixed on him. He seems larger, darker and older than in the photograph; his eyes are blacker, his dreadlocks longer. Yet it is unquestionably the same face: the same thick jaw and powerful neck, the same determined glare.

‘Aysh,’ he says in a deep voice, his eyes fixed on David. He slowly pulls a shotgun from under his seat and waves it in David’s direction.

‘uNgubani igama lakho?’ he asks, the gun still weaving through the air, ‘What’s your name? What are you doing here?’

His English is formal, polished, educated, but with a twist of pantsula, a dash of street. Like his eyes: careful, with a hint of incipient violence.

‘My name is David. Please, let me sit down, without a gun pointed at me, and I’ll tell you why I’m here.’

‘Sit down,’ says Absalom, without removing the gun from the direction of David’s abdomen. David sits on an upturned beer-crate.

‘Have you heard from your family lately?’

‘I know that my family is dead.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘What do you have to do with my family, David? Why are you here? Perhaps you know there are many people out there trying to kill me?’

‘No, I’m here to help you.’

‘I don’t need help. I live best alone.’

‘You can’t live alone forever. Look, there’s an opportunity for you. You could go back to Fort Campbell and become chief.’

David waits for the suggestion to take hold, while Absalom strokes the trigger. ‘Just think of what that could do for you.’

Absalom rakes his throat and spits onto the red earth. ‘You mampara. Why do you think I’m still alive and the rest – everyone – is dead? Anyway, do you think I want to be chief of that tribe? That bunch of thieves and liars? Eh? Go back to wherever you came from. I’m staying right here.’

‘Perhaps your family were once all those things. That doesn’t mean you have to be the same. You could change things.’

‘Things do not change.’

‘Let me at least explain to you why I’m here.’

‘Speak, umlungu. Time is one thing I *do* have.’

David relates his investigations of the last two weeks: the brief from Simon, the rumours of development, the World Bank and CES. Absalom hardly seems perturbed by the implications about his family’s murder, so interested is he in learning more about the people David has met. Absalom has been alone, adrift, for too long. He interrupts David with questions at every turn:

- ‘I haven’t thought about Professor Sibaya in years.’

- ‘Solomon? Is that old skelim still alive!’

- ‘What did the girl from the Fort Campbell Hotel look like? Did she smell like coconut milk? Yes, she went to the girl’s high school next door. Yes, of course!’

- ‘What was George drinking? What music was playing in his shebeen? What was Pius’s handicap?’

When David mentions !Xi, Absalom draws rapid breath, as if he had been stung.

Eventually David must bring him back to the point: that there are millions of rands floating down towards Fort Campbell, and Absalom could be the one to scoop them up. Which is why he needs legal representation.

Absalom spits again. ‘Lawyers? You mean vultures? Do I look like dead meat already, heh?’

‘Well, are you going to do it by yourself?’

‘No, I’m not going to do it at all.’

‘No progress without change, my friend.’

Absalom snorts at the silly platitude.

‘Listen,’ continues David, ‘between us we might be able to figure out who killed your family. We might be able to organise that you – and your chieftaincy – are secure. We might be able to make you very rich. You could be powerful. You could make your lands whatever you want them to be. How can you not want these things? Perhaps you are the one that’s mampara? Hey?’

Absalom fixes his ebony eyes on David. David stares back, awaiting an explanation.

‘Fine. I tell you why. And then you leave.’

‘Fine.’

Absalom rises and walks backwards towards the hut, his gun loosely trained on David, and returns with two Label quarts, by some miracle icy cold. They settle into their seats. Absalom swallows half his beer, as if his memory needs to be irrigated to germinate. He begins to talk, sometimes staring at David, accusatory, or out to sea, as if the answer to some question lies beyond the horizon, or just below the water:

‘As you know, I was born into the Thembeke family. My grandfather was the chief of the Fort Campbell valley, in which lived five thousand people and ten thousand cattle. As a boy I lived the life of a Xhosa boy, isolated from the Great Wide World. I was free to run around the veld with the other boys, hunting birds with my kati, herding some of the family’s cattle. I then went to a private school, along with the other sons of chiefs and rich men, and still all was good. We played soccer, shouted at the ntombis from the girl’s school. Boasted about our father’s cars.’

‘My unhappiness only began after my initiation. One night I was sitting around the fire with the men, finally one of the *indodas*. At this fire the elders told me the many secrets

of the tribe, right from the earliest times when the Bantu moved South from the Heart of Africa, to when the amaXhosa split off to become their own nation, to the wars with the Zulus and the Boers and the English, to the slaughter of the cattle. As you know, the Thembeke were unbelievers – we refused to slaughter our cattle, believing that the prophecy was a trick by the White man. Since then many amaXhosa have hated us for failing to fulfil the prophecy. The history of the amaXhosa is another story, but that was the first time I felt a stirring in my gut, shame at where I came from: by refusing to obey Xhosa tribal law, by not slaughtering their cattle, my ancestors had enough to eat, and thereby survived the Great Famine which resulted. They would not otherwise have become chiefs of the Fort Campbell valley. In those days the valley had no name, but was called by the name of the river that ran through it: the Mnanzi.’

‘But that was just the beginning of the stories I heard that night. The fire was burning down, just some glowing coals, and the stars were bright. All around us bushes leaned over, reflecting the light of the fire. The fathers went to their sleeping-mats, and only the *babamkhulus* remained, including one you know already as Big Mandla, my great-uncle. Now this was a man who I loved and respected. He was a real indoda, a strong leader. Big Mandla told us how the White Man had always been our friend: after the war with the amaXhosa they built a fort in the valley, after which it was named, and left the affairs of the valley to us, to govern as we wanted. They tried to prevent us from killing our cattle, they gave us guns with which to fight off our enemies in other tribes. Unlike many of the stubborn Believers, our wise ancestors saw no reason to be at war with them. He told us about the times when South Africa had been at war, and that the White man had chosen him to go to the far north, to Angola, to fight for the country. Why he was chosen he would not

say, but I found out later in my life: he had worked for the security police. He was an *impimpi*, giving them information about the movement. He even worked as a guard in the security police compound near PE, which is where he was given all his money and cars and guns. He worked with such... efficiency... that they transferred him to the border, to the hidden war. They said it was good for the enemy to see a black man when they are captured. It confuses the mind, makes it easier to break.'

'Around that fire Big Mandla told us of the punishments he had seen: the plastic bag, the cold bath, the electric shocks, the pliers, the blow-torch. He was laughing, boasting. I, who had just been learning at Fort Hare about jurisprudence and South African history, was sickened, but I sat through the night, listening to Big Mandla's boasting, making plans for escape from this dirty village.'

'But this was not my only reason for leaving Fort Campbell. At Fort Hare I had fallen in love with... let me call her... a daughter of the revolution - Mbali. She was studying history and politics, and was in some of my classes. She was a member of the Communist Party. She was beautiful; she had this chocolate skin and a small chin, and these wide lips. And her eyes would... capture me. Trap me. When she laughed she opened up, like her name, which means Flower in English. She was funny: sometimes she was shy and hid behind my protection, other times she was loud and... indignant. She would always fight every battle. She believed in the Movement and the Communist Party and the revolution. She made me read Karl Marx and Engels. Haai. She was always going to readings and meetings and book clubs, arguing with me about our duty and the people and solidarity. Black consciousness. When I told her that our people betray and murder each other and the

Communists are probably just as bad as the Americans, she just looked at me as if I was a broken bird that she needed to nurse. The silly girl.'

'Mbali's father was a lawyer and a great man in the movement, always flying to Pretoria or London to negotiate or plead, always on the run from the security forces. I met him once: he seemed so calm for a hunted man. Mbali tried to make me stay at Fort Hare and finish my studies, but I knew one thing: the world was chaotic and without morals. Even my own people conspired with their oppressors. The only ones who made any sense were the gangsters: 'if the world is going to shit, at least make some money out of it'. Ja – I was rooking dagga, driving dagga from our area to Cape Town, PE, Jozi, wherever. Every time I returned to my family, I only saw hypocrisy. Every time I saw Mbali, I saw futility. In the gangs we were making cash, spending it in the shebeens and on smart suits, walking the streets like a tsotsi, carrying a gun, where even the police won't call your name. That felt like power to me. That felt right to me.'

'Then Mbali moved to London. I think this was around... 1994. These were the last days of the security force, and they were coming down hard, panicking. Her father had been arrested – by my own uncle! I ran to his house and we argued. In the end my head was red with anger. I walked out of his house with death on my mind. I told my connections to remove the protection from his life. A week later he was robbed and murdered. I have felt some guilt since then, but not much. I have paid for my sins: Big Mandla had many friends, both in the security police and in the tribe. I heard from the gang that an order had been sent on my life. I volunteered to drive a taxi full of dagga to Jozi, which I did, but I never returned. I knew going back to Fort Campbell would cost me my life.'

‘You have heard that I was a gangster. Ja - I wish I could see old Georgie-boy again, that old skelim. You know, you are lucky to be alive eh? Anyway, what Pius said was true. Big Mandla’s men found me and shot Georgie’s shebeen to pieces trying to kill me. I survived in ICU in Baragwanath - lucky for me it was across the road, otherwise I wouldn’t be alive now. After that I knew I would have to hide, so I moved to Swaziland, where the gang needed someone on the border to organise transportation. So now you know why I can’t leave: these people still want me dead. Especially if I return to become chief of the tribe, after having killed my uncle, run away, and become a tsotsi.’

‘I have already nearly died: someone found me in Swaziland. I don’t know who. They could have been paid by anyone, or they could just have been ordinary skollies. They knew I was a gangster, so they shot me to steal my phone and my shoes. I was left there in the bush.’

‘So what Pius told me was true?’

‘Yes. The ancestors spoke to me, they said that my life was not meant for wasting. I followed the ancestors to the place of an old sangoma. There I became an *isithwasa*, an apprentice sangoma. I learned to hear the spirits, and they sent me to the Last Bushman. He is a very powerful magician.’

Absalom flashes his eyes at David, who suddenly remembers the red balls of fire which had appeared in Absalom’s orbits the previous night.

‘Why are you not still in the mountains, with !Xi?’

‘Ah, that’s another question entirely. These things I have not heard at their source, but many months later, from my cousin, Joseph, who sent me news of my family from time to time. He is now dead.’

From under his seat Absalom pulls a packet of Boxer tobacco and rolls a cigarette. He lights it; puffs of smoke drift gently backwards into the trees. David recalls Joseph's body lying in the courtyard of the Fort Campbell police station. Absalom does not know that half of Joseph's face was a pulpy mush of red, from which his splintered bones protruded. He does not know that in the summer heat Joseph's body rapidly stiffened and started to decompose, as if it could hardly wait to return to the earth. David can see that Absalom's thoughts are elsewhere, perhaps in memories of the man's life. Perhaps they were childhood friends. Perhaps they played soccer together on the fields near their homes. David does not know. He does not ask. Absalom continues:

'About a year ago, last summer, a white man in a black suit, driving a big Land Cruiser, came to Fort Campbell and asked to speak to the Chief. Sipiwo invited this important-looking stranger into his kraal. The stranger swore Sipiwo to secrecy until their business was done. From the outset it was obvious that breaking this promise would result in punishment not just from his conscience, but from the man's associates. He represented a company called CES, a giant international construction company. Now, they had proposed to the World Bank a "development" of the Eastern coast, in which the rivers flowing down from the mountains would be dammed to provide irrigation and electric power. The biggest project would be right there, in the Fort Campbell valley, where the steep walls and narrow gorges would be perfect for the construction of a giant dam. The company first needed assurance from the chief that he would not stand in the way of progress, that he would not refuse to hand over the small part of his tribal lands to be flooded by the new dam. He offered Sipiwo a large sum of money – I think it was a million rand – in exchange for signing a contract assuring him the dam could be built.'

‘The total cost of the network of dams would be four-hundred million US dollars - four billion rand. The South African government would take out a loan from the World Bank and use this money to pay CES. Rumour had it that they had been lining pockets right from the top down to make this possible, as well as spreading false information: biased environmental reports, false witness reports, estimates of the “development” that would result. They claimed they would build schools, roads and clinics, and give jobs to thousands of people. They claimed that those who lost their land would be compensated for far more than its real value. Everyone whose land would be flooded would become rich. The chief and the chief’s family would be millionaires.’

‘Siphiwo told the stranger that he would have to speak to his council of elders, but that they would keep any discussions secret. That night the elders sat around the fire again, and Siphiwo presented the man’s case: the dam would bring prosperity to the region. They would become a rich tribe, men of influence. With more electricity the people could buy televisions, fridges, lights, computers. Fort Campbell could finally be dragged into the modern world.’

‘A very old induna asked Siphiwo if he had gone mad. Siphiwo knew exactly what the old man meant. Besides being the generations-old home of thousands of people, the valley was a sacred place. For the amaXhosa the land isn’t just a shape on a map. There are many graves where people go to pray to the ancestors. If these graves were flooded the ancestors would be very angry and punish their children. Siphiwo’s father was buried in the valley, and his father’s father, back until the founders of the Thembeke family itself. There are sacred caves where sangomas go to speak to the spirits. There are ancient trees and rocks and pools that each have their own spirits and their own place for sacrifices and prayers, that

have been known by the people here for many years. The Mnanzi river has its own spirit. It is alive. I know that for you that might not make any sense, but the old amaXhosa think differently. What a thing *means* is as important as what a thing *is*. For them the river has a spirit that has sheltered and fed and watered us for hundreds of years. If we repay the spirit by blocking its path and drowning its home, it will be angry. It is not justice. There would be no end to the anger of the spirits and the ancestors if their sacred graves were desecrated so that people could have television.'

'The council of elders was divided: some believed we should give up our out-dated ways. It was time to move forward. Our people needed roads, schools and houses. They needed money to make their lives better. Who was the council to withhold these things from them? Progress is inevitable. This decision had been placed in their hands for them to make the most of it. They should agree to the terms of the company and consider themselves fortunate.'

'Others said that we must remain in our traditional ways, as African wisdom has taught and preserved us since the beginning of time. The progress offered by the stranger would destroy our culture, which would result in great confusion and suffering: what would bind the people together and give their lives meaning? The old men scratched the earth with their fingers and shouted: "Will our children and grandchildren become mindless soul-less money-worshipping Western automatons! If we give this victory to development, it will be a loss for us, for our souls. Our sacred lands, our ancient graves, the spirit of the river – these cannot be violated for a development which in reality kills us!"'

'Others believed that the progress offered by the dam need not destroy our culture. The money and the progress could help people's lives. People who can read and who are

healthy can better learn about being an amaXhosa, can better stand up for us in a world where old cultures are fighting each other or slowly collapsing. We must only be sure that the dam is under our control and the company's promises aren't lies: that the dam is not too big or too small, that the electricity goes to us and not some other place, that our people get jobs, that it won't damage the rest of the valley. That the company and the money don't corrupt us like politicians.'

'The *indaba* lasted all night. In the morning they cast a final vote, and by just one vote decided to refuse the offer.'

'CES then took the proposal to the Mnanzi, saying that if they accepted, they would be made chiefs of the valley which was their true inheritance. Clearly CES had done their homework. The older Mnanzi were opposed the building of the dam, but the younger generation, those who were gaining power, saw the dam as progress and the elders as sentimental and impractical. The dam would make the Thembeke rich and powerful; the Mnanzi would not have another opportunity like this. In the end they agreed to the terms of CES and asked the Moroccans to help them get rid of the Thembeke.'

'The Moroccans were reluctant to be involved in such a large massacre. They were smugglers, dealers, protectors, but not as bloodthirsty as that. I think the Mnanzi might have paid Solomon's boys – yes, my old friends – street tsotsis who will do anything for money, to do their dirty-work for them. They would have agreed if they had known I was not there. Pantula fo' life, ek se!' he says with a grim smile.

'I heard all this news through my cousin. I was not at all surprised, considering what I had seen in the sacred mountain. Now, you must understand this: in the valley of the bushman there live many powerful spirits. CES planned to dam up many rivers all the way

along the coast, including the river which has its source in that valley, from the very pool you were swimming in. It was the spirit of this river, and the many *enas* of the ancestors that would have their graves desecrated, that guided you to !Xi, that have guided you here. The spirits do not reveal their purposes plainly. They can only carry us forward on our own river. Like you, I was told to leave the sacred valley, to come here, to wait beneath this tree, to sweat in this heat. Why we are here, I don't know, but I do believe the spirits have asked me to sacrifice my inheritance. Perhaps they will ask the same of you?'

David thinks of his flight with !Xi, wonders what it meant.

'Perhaps,' he says slowly. 'I'm not even sure I want my inheritance.'

'Nor am I.'

The late afternoon passes. The shadows of the trees fall over the steep hill, but the sea still sparkles under the sun. Absalom rolls another cigarette. They open another two beers.

'Maybe I have been sent here', says David, 'to persuade you to claim your inheritance, to return to Fort Campbell and proclaim yourself Chief. Maybe that's your fate, maybe that's why I was sent here: with your power you could decide whether the dam should be built or not.'

'Yes, that's possible. But perhaps I have been sent to distract you from what you believe your goal is. Perhaps making me return to the Transkei is *your* inheritance.'

'But what does that mean?'

'I don't know.'

'The council sits tomorrow. That will be your last chance to return and claim your chieftaincy.'

‘I know.’

‘There’s time.’

‘But I will not.’ Absalom seems about to speak, then checks himself. He sticks his stompie into the ground. ‘The girl I was in love with – Mbali - is now the wife of the son of the Mnanzi chief, and a member of the Eastern Cape parliament. She is happy there, with the other old comrades, driving in big parliamentary cars, flying around the country on government business. The building of the dam is the decision of her tribe. She told me when I left for Soweto: “someday you’ll understand”. There are still many things I do not understand, but this I know: it is not up to this crazy old tsotsi to determine the fate of that part of the world, which for many of my people is the whole world.’

David stares at the sea, watching the shore-break peel over a sandbank, reflecting the green of the jungle-slope.

‘Do you not know the binds that love ties around the heart?’ asks Absalom, or at least, that is what David hears through the cotton-wool of the heat and the cigarette-smoke.

David does not reply, until Absalom thinks he will get no answer. At length, he murmurs: ‘Yes.’

‘Then you must accept that it is now up to the Mnanzi. R&R, CES’s attorney’s, have been negotiating with them. In any case, too many people want me dead: CES, R&R, the Mnanzi, the Thembeke themselves. Even the police are after me. I must stay here.’

‘What now?’

‘I’m not moving, and that’s final.’

‘Nothing can persuade you? You will become one of the richest people in the country. You could have influence in parliament. You could establish your family as a

major force, like the Zumas or the Phosas or the Mandelas. Or you could save the valley from CES and save the soul of your people. Whichever way you look at it, you have an opportunity. Are you really just going to sit here and watch the clock tick by until your time has come and gone?’

‘You contradict yourself. In fact, I will have to choose between the destruction of the valley and the poverty of my people. That is not a choice I want to make. In any case, as I said: not only will I lose my life, but the spirits have told me to stay here. The path for the future is not in my hands.’

David speculates: perhaps Absalom is not really afraid of the gangsters. Perhaps he is afraid of seeing Mbali again, happy with her new husband, riding the ANC bandwagon. Absalom doesn’t want to see how he has been left behind. How he has travelled the wrong path all these years.

Absalom disappears into the shack and returns with two more beers. He has left the gun behind. David paces up and down on the patch of grass in front of the shack.

‘Well,’ says David, ‘I’m still not convinced you need to stay here. With the amount of money and power you’ll get if you return, there will be a way around every problem.’

‘Especially if I have your law firm on my side,’ says Absalom, his face contorted in sarcasm.

‘That’s not the point. Are you staying here for real reasons or because you are afraid? Can you answer honestly to yourself?’

Absalom shakes his head and takes another sip of beer. ‘Have you ever loved a woman?’ he asks.

‘Yes.’

‘Tell me about it.’

David grinds at the ground with his feet, hesitant. He tells Absalom about Angeline, how she despises him for lying, cheating, living such a small life after such a big start. He tells him about Georgina, how she is slowly drinking herself to death, perhaps as a kind of punishment. How he could not choose between the two, how he has ended up with neither. David thinks about Gayathrie, but does not mention her, as if she were a secret that should not be broken.

‘If there was a chance, a solution to your problem, would you take it?’

David nods slowly, ‘Yes.’

Absalom pulls a hollow smile. ‘There’s only one thing left to do, my friend.’

‘What’s that?’

‘We drink.’

The setting sun floods the ocean with blood. In the gloom under the banana trees they build a fire, which throws shadows against the wide leaves. They talk like old friends, as if David were not there on a corporate errand, as if Absalom were not an evasive client.

Absalom shows David into his shack, whose interior – lit by a paraffin lamp - is less derelict than the shabby outside suggests. The walls are papered in *Drum* cutouts – a pouting Brenda Fassie (my God rest her soul), Lucas Radebe in his Leeds United kit, Chi Chi in Givenchy. A gas-burning stove and fridge, a single bed, an unvarnished pine table, a single shelf of books. David runs his eyes over the titles: *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, *The Poisonwood Bible*, *The Madonna of Excelsior*. On the table is a gaudy ghettoblaster set amidst heaps of CDs, which is soon blaring Mafikizolo into the darkening sky.

‘So you gonna stay here until I decide to leave?’

‘Well, you have until tomorrow. I’m gonna give it my best shot.’

‘If you insist. We’ll run out of beers though.’

David flashes a lopsided grin and disappears at a run into the trees, returning at length, as the last light fades, with two six-packs fresh from his mini-fridge.

‘Aysh.’

They sit beside the fire, talking about their failed loves, their botched decisions, their regrets. In a long lull in the conversation, Absalom digs into a pocket, pulls out a bankie, and gives David a questioning look. David digs around in a pocket and pulls out the crumpled Pick ‘n Pay bag.

In the darkness they lose all sense of direction and end up on the floor of the shack. David makes Absalom listen to Pink Floyd, which he in turn laughs at, abhors and fears, the echoed wails casting large shadows in his grass-addled imagination. Absalom plays Spokes Mashiyane, which moves David close to tears. Hours are dug out of the plastic bag and blown away in a haze of Creedence, Bowie, Lou Reed, TKZ, Miles Davis, Ashanti, Bongo Maffin. Both have the same Methodman Redman CD, to which they maximize the volume, the little speakers rattling in their cages.

David mentions that his father also served in Angola, on the same side as Big Mandla, but that he had never spoken about his time there. *The Border* was a place with no name to which white boys were sent to become men, to learn how to kill. There was a war, but there was no war. The South African government hushed it up like a dirty secret. The American government, like elsewhere in the world, would not acknowledge its part in the massacres.

The Russians were behind a curtain of iron. When the boys returned from the Border they were not allowed to say: 'In a country a thousand miles from South Africa I have been running through the bush, aiming at the backs of black boy-soldiers. I have been sent to villages to kill the women and children while their men fight another battle. I have retreated in a shower of blood, planting landmines on the village paths. I have sat in the rifle-sights of Cuban mercenaries. I have been in a war.' Instead they must say: 'I have been on the border. I have been protecting the country from the millions of desperate, crazed Africans who would enter it, *die swart gevaar*.'

Absalom has heard about the secret war: besides his uncle, some of the gangsters were employed as mercenaries, and had returned with war-tales. Flying in a Rooikat helicopter, low across the bush, blowing trees out of the ground for fun. Taking the tanks to sixty kilometres an hour and jamming them into reverse, just to hear the gears strip. Long, boring hours spent in trucks, in tents, standing guard. The dancing girls sent from Pretoria, for the pleasure of the officers only. Sewing a grenade into the corpse of a baby and throwing it over a village wall, running hunch-backed through the trees, splinters roughing your skin. Cutting off the middle finger of a man, insulting him with his own digit. A secret war on an arena the size of Europe. Sixty-thousand Cuban troops, Russian MIGS, Israeli explosives experts reading Sartre in-between destroying sand dunes on cloudless afternoons. Opposing cold war generals directing African troops towards each others guns. Twenty years of massacre around a constantly shifting, invisible border. Big Mandla remembered the South African camps: the CIA operatives in their suits and loud voices, the turned Swapo fighters, their eyes glazed from months of torture, *die manne*. But, of course, none of that ever happened. *Die*

*manne* did not go to war. They simply went to 'The Border'. Left as boys, returned as boys no longer, smeared with silence.

Big Mandla even spent some time as a prisoner in an MPLA camp, where Russian generals mixed with Umkonto We Sizwe cadres and Cuban teenagers in camouflage, comparing torture notes and sharing AK47 ammunition. Russian-trained Movambos flying MIGs low over South African troops, firing lines through their tents. But he doesn't know what happened to Big Mandla there. He does not speak of the prison camp. NoGovernment, Absalom's mother, once told him that Big Mandla was held underground for a year, fed through a hole in the floor. That when he returned he was silent and mumbling, laughing suddenly and then shouting about nothing, disappearing for weeks at a time. And that eventually he pretended to turn, to become an MPLA mercenary, but escaped through the bush on foot, walking five hundred kilometres through the desert and the mine-fields to Namibia.

Absalom stops. The calls of insects and the hush of waves fills the sudden silence.

'I'm glad I missed conscription,' says David, who had been saved from *The Border* by a single year. The remark suddenly throws the question of the war into a new light, and they snap out of the fog of camaraderie to find themselves on the floor of the hut, Coldplay moaning in the background.

David recalls a memory, so distant as to be only a suggestion. He was a child, six or seven years old, lying on the Persian rugs in the living room. Patience was dusting the windows sills again, humming to herself. David asked when his daddy was coming home. Patience, in her low voice and sing-song accent, said that daddy is at work, that he has to stay

there until five 'o clock. David said *that's not fair*. Patience smiled the smile of the knowing and said work isn't fair, and life isn't fair. She said that work was like a prison, but that Master had been in a prison before, and that Master Simon had also been in a prison, so David mustn't worry.

When David protested, giggling, that no, his father had never been to prison, Patience said of course not, not a real prison. Relieved, David rolled over onto his stomach and traced the intricate lines of the carpet with his fingers, his father and Simon and their prison gone from his mind. Yet somehow the memory has remained, distant and uncertain. Patience, flicking the feather duster across the window ledge: 'Master has been in a prison before, and Master Simon.'

The suspicion dawns upon him, but he quickly dismisses the possibility as too far-fetched, as ridiculous, impossible. But where else would Simon and his father have been in prison?

'Was anyone else in Big Mandla's prison? Did he have company for his year underground?'

Absalom searches his memory. noGovernment had once heard Big Mandla speak about his time in the MPLA camp, when he was drunk and the fire was burning low. He had shared his cell with three other fighters. Two South African *boere* and an American.

'Imagine,' he had said, 'sharing a cell with three people for a year. A whole year. Just three people.' He shook his head and smashed his quart-bottle against the rocks surrounding the fire.

'When was Big Mandla in Angola?' asks David.

'I don't know.'

‘My father was also in Angola. I think he might also have been in prison there.’

‘Aysh.’

‘Yeah, fucking aysh.’

‘What does that mean?’ asks Absalom.

‘I don’t know, my friend. I don’t know.’

‘Do you think...’

‘No!’

‘But that might explain...’

‘What?’

‘Why would two whiteys in Cape Town take such an interest in a construction project in the middle of the Transkei? How would they even *know* about it? What is the grape-vine? They were there with an American. An American company. But then why the murders, why...’

‘Shit. No. You’re just stoned, my friend. You’re losing the plot. Relax.’

David rapidly constructs and deconstructs possibilities until his head spins and his stomach lurches – one instant it seems clear, there was some kind of collusion, some kind of prisoners’ brotherhood. The next instant the notion seems absurd, childish. The shack seems to close in on him. Gravity increases its pull. The ground moves like a demented fairground ride. Absalom is scratching about in the dark, looking for his bankie, losing balance.

David feels unconsciousness closing in. Time flies, and he is barely holding on. A blackness spreads from the edge of his vision, a deadening of sound and touch. From a distance, as if from across some great inner cosmos, he hears his phone ringing.

David pushes himself up and answers.

‘Max!’ he shouts, ‘Dude!’ David’s face stretches then compresses in disbelief.

‘Yeah... OK... You the man... Yeah. Mother fucker...’

‘Who is it?’

‘Hold on,’ says David, and turns to Absalom. ‘A friend of mine. He just found CES’s connection in the World Bank.’

‘Yeah?’

‘An ex-CIA agent called Henry Ryle.’

‘No fucking way.’

‘Way. Max’s connections in DC tracked him down. I had to call in a major favour for that. Ryle is in South Africa, under cover as a tourist. He’s at an outdoor trance festival in the Karoo called the Alien Safari. If we leave now we can be there before morning. You coming?’

‘Fuck you, bitch.’

David speaks to Max again. ‘I owe you one bro. We on our way.’

## CHAPTER 13--THE GREAT KAROO

*This side niggas too hardcore*

*That side niggas too hardcore*

*Inna middle niggas too hardcore*

*So watcha watcha watcha want?*

*It ain't even a question.*

MC-battles rattle the Landie as they climb over the Southern Berg, the car-lights illuminating swathes of jagged rock and dark ravines. Through a fog of marijuana David and Absalom debate their route (they are not quite lost, but neither do they know where they are) and argue incessantly over why Absalom has come on this trip. Absalom accuses David of trickery, of taking advantage of his slow reaction-time. David accuses Absalom of cowardice. Besides, Absalom would never have allowed himself to be bundled into the car in the dead of night if there was not some part of him that wanted to. It is too late to assign blame now. David had phoned Henry earlier, using the number Max had given him. A high, whining voice, full of camp sarcasm, had dripped an answer into the phone.

'Nyasss,' he hissed, and demanded to see Absalom before any meeting took place.

‘Of course,’ replied David, forming images of a serpent, a Priscilla, a Patrick Bateman on a bad day, ‘just give me directions.’

Henry turned out to be deep in the arid koppies of the Great Karoo, a hundred kilometres from Three Sisters.

David explains once again to Absalom (he is not sure if he has said this before, or how many times), that if he doesn’t come to the Alien Safari he might never have a chance to find out what had happened, the real story. Once again Absalom turns a sullen red eye.

‘Just keep driving, my tricky friend. Yes – tricky you are.’

This sends David bursting into such laughter that they nearly drive off the face of a cliff.

‘Whatever, my friend,’ he says, recovering, ‘just try to find out where we are.’

‘Are you mad? We’re lost, you idiot.’

‘No – we’ll hit the N1 sooner or later. Or we’re going in circles.’

‘Exactly.’

‘Shut up.’

Out of the desert darkness a cluster of lights appears on the horizon. Soon they roll into Graaff-Reniet and stop at the petrol station. A few inbred-looking whiteys linger behind the counter while snappily dressed commuters from a long-distance minibus taxi browse for sandwiches. David and Absalom stock up on Red Bull, pepper-steak pies, droe-wors, and Nando’s peri-peri chips. From the woman at the cash-register (wearing a floral blouse tucked into denims pulled almost up to her falling breasts) they extract directions to Three Sisters: the quickest route is over a minor pass through the Sneeuberg.

They continue, trying to sober up, bouncing over the rough pass. The Alien Safari, like most outdoor parties, will only reach its peak the following morning at sunrise. Nonetheless they must make good time, and must avoid going in circles. The rising sun is only a few hours away.

The party seems evasive. They finally bump into the N1 and turn south. Before they reach Three Sisters they see the sign for the party, an alien head with elephant tusks, luminous against a Zulu shield. They turn down a near-invisible track that runs up a dry river-bed. They drive for almost an hour, growing increasingly convinced that they are in the wrong place, about to get shot by some *bittereinder* and savaged by the ghosts of his *plaas*. As they begin to lose faith they see, glowing in the branches of a Quivertree, another shield bearing the motif of the party: the alien head, the tusks. But the night is still silent, the desert still empty. They turn the music off and talk to ward off the silence.

‘Tell me about your family,’ says David, who can only remember flashes of the bodies contorted in their steel tombs.

‘My family? Aysh. Where should I begin with that?’

David explains how he trawled through the Thembeke family’s records. Life summed up in a list of moments: birth, baptism, marriage, divorce, death. This uncle’s death from ‘assault’, that cousin’s death from ‘acute respiratory disorder’, a euphemism for the shameful spectre of AIDS. Official facts painted over the unofficial truth. ‘So,’ concludes David, ‘give us your version then. What about your grandfather? Your grandmother?’ (David recalls her loose ashen skin hanging from her stiff body)

One by one Absalom tells the story of each of the characters in the Thembeke saga (or, as he sees it, the Thembeke tragedy). The venerable grandparents who saw themselves as

pragmatists while others saw them as traitors. The second generation, who lived well off the fat of the land. Mission-school educated, they had the first cars and televisions and bank accounts. Absalom's father, Little Mandla, was a peaceful man who refused to step into the quicksand of politics. Little Mandla was a reader, a philosopher. He knew all the old Xhosa stories and had a shelf full of English books he had bought from the Anglican Mission in Cala. It was there that he met noGovernment, who had travelled all the way from Lusikisiki to purchase the cheap books provided by English charities. Over a cup of coffee outside the stone church they had discussed the merits of Rousseau and the similarities between the communists and the capitalists, how power corrupted no matter how it was exercised. They must have felt relief at sharing their dirty secret: by learning from the outside world they were crumbling their internal *isiXhosa*, a collapse that could be contagious, and was therefore feared.

Little Mandla died in a 'vehicle accident' on the way home from Umtata, where he had taken Absalom to school. A sober man, a careful driver, he had driven off a cliff, straight over a red and blue warning sign. For noGovernment the official mourning period was not long enough. Alone in her house with Absalom (his sisters had married and left the cursed valley), she bristled with anger for many years afterwards. How could God let Little Mandla pay for the sins of his father? How could his life, so precious and unique in her eyes, be snuffed out by the forces of the worthless and the mindless? David remembers noGovernment's face, noble and intelligent, lined with suffering. He remembers the words he whispered to himself: strangely beautiful.

The younger generation: Absalom grew up with his cousins - Maseko, Joseph, Gideon. They were the only boys in the valley who had a chance to go to school – a different

kind of life to the other boys, who spent their childhood herding cattle out in the veld. The Thembeke boys felt like part of a wider world, partly severed from the valley and its old Xhosa life. Absalom adds a story to each bloodied face: playing cricket and rugby instead of soccer, trips to shebeens in Umtata, smoking dagga after school, going to the only cinema in the Transkei and blowing all their pocket-money on Kung-fu movies. Sneaking out in the Mercedes and visiting their girlfriends in the dead of night. All dead now, these boys. The cream of Fort Campbell, scooped up by a shower of AK47 bullets. Absalom seems stuck in some thought of death. His stories trickle to a halt. David pulls out the shell which he still keeps in his pocket.

‘For you.’

A sliver of moon, a trillion stars. The night-light reveals a range of low, dry mountains to their left, to their right a flat plain stretches to the horizon, punctured only by a handful of crumbling koppies. Another shield, stuck on a tall boulder precariously balanced on the top of a koppie, marks a turn-off that leads left into a valley. Following one shield after another, into rougher and rougher paths, they work their way into the mountains, until they are deep into dry canyons and broken-topped hills.

While Absalom rolls the shell around in his hands, David tells him about his own life: his drunk and indecisive father, his string of homes, his family’s rise to riches, his multiple disasters in love. Absalom responds only with silent nods and the occasional exclamation – *hawu, haai*. This strange man driving him through the mountains, white skin on the outside, a dark mess inside. At night the desert life comes out to play, and they often stop to avoid a collision, or just to watch: illuminated by the headlights are families of bat-eared foxes, troops of baboons, Vervet monkeys, devil-horned Duikers. Once, standing beside the road,

its giant frame motionless in the dark, is a single Kudu bull, silhouetted against the flat expanse to the north. This is no-man's land: not farms, not game parks, just land.

David rambles on about his father and begins to speculate about Angola, the desert camp, the collusion of ex-soldiers. Absalom is sceptical: 'All the white men went to the border,' he says, 'Patience could have been talking about anything. You meant to be the lawyer. Don't you need reasonable evidence? Your family and your firm might not be involved at all. You might be freaking out over nothing.'

'Yeah? Then how did they know about the development?'

'Who knows? Not you, my friend.'

'Yeah, not me. But listen, if anyone knows the truth, it's Henry. He will know who killed your family. No rumours. only truth.'

'Yeah. Sure.'

Ahead, for the first time, they see a terrestrial light, which, as they approach, becomes a cluster of lights, a hippie parking-lot. They grind to a halt in a vast field of cars, eerily deserted. There is nothing to be seen or heard but the chirping of night-insects and the glitter of starlight against metal.

'Where's the party?' asks Absalom.

'Shut the fuck up.'

From behind a steep rocky hill they see twin beams of headlights, which are soon followed by a rolling, bouncing bus mounted on tractor tyres. The bus stops near them, beneath a large dead Eucalyptus. The driver is a Cavendish Crusty: a girl that looks no more than thirteen, wearing dirty Ugg boots, a miniskirt, a scarf, and a tattoo of twin snakes encircling her bare breasts.

'Tickets please,' she pipes in a high voice.

'We have no tickets,' replies David.

'That's five hundred rand then.'

He hands her the money.

'No, each.'

David and Absalom sit in the front seat, beside the child driver, who swings the bus into a u-turn and back up the winding valley. There is no road here; she forces them over naked ground of broken rocks. While she drives she explains:

'I'll drop you off at the beginning of the trail. It's about a three kay walk. Try to follow the path. If you get lost, just follow the lights on the mountains.'

The ground becomes increasingly broken, and the bus lurches sickeningly over the rocks, deeper into a narrowing valley, the tops of the mountains cutting black teeth against the spread of stars. The girl is true to her word: the bus suddenly stops. The valley is now floored with stunted desert trees, through which winds a narrow footpath. As soon as they step off the bus, wondering where exactly this path may lead, the girl swings into another violent u-turn and disappears down the valley, blowing up dust into the clear night.

'You got us into this,' says Absalom.

'Easy. Let's just follow the path.'

Once their eyes are accustomed to the darkness the path is easy going, looping around the bends of the valley. They walk in silence, their breath steaming in the cool air. Soon they can hear a heart-beat, a sub-sonic thud, as if the earth were beating. The sound steadily grows louder, until it is echoing down the valley like a giant ominous bass-drum. As they continue the mountains around them wall up in rocky slopes and jutting cliffs. They round

another bend and the sound suddenly amplifies, the distinctive two-two thud of trance-music. On the enormous shoulder of a mountain in the near-distance is projected, in a powerful UV spot-light, the alien-head, the tusks, looping back and forth.

Feeling safer with a destination in sight, the pair quicken their pace. Around the next bend the sound suddenly booms. The valley has broadened, forming a giant geological amphitheatre, at the bottom of which is the party. Coloured tents lit from the inside, rows of food-stalls, streams of people. The main dance-floor is surrounded by a circle of giant, searching Acacias in which are hung glowing mandalas and alien shields, fronted by two house-sized stacks of speakers between which a huddle of DJs man the decks. In the middle there throbs an enormous crowd, bouncing, ecstatic, dirty, fist-throwing, each moving to their own beat, each in time. Aging hippies, European backpackers with dreads, surfers with drug-fatigue, three-legged dogs, snot-nosed children, suburban teenagers on acid, lost souls, Christians, solipsistic psychology students – the usual trance crowd. Without realising it both David and Absalom are bouncing their bodies to the same beat while they walk down, slowly, to the space-colony below.

‘Where’s Henry?’ asks Absalom.

‘He said to meet him at the front of the main stage, on the dias. But lets look around a bit first. Get our bearings.’

‘Yeah.’

They sample Chai tea, receive neck-massages from Lebanese identical twins, inhale nitrous oxide balloons, smoke a joint in the chill-tent, in which pairs of beautiful hippies are already fornicating. David buys an *Infected Mushroom* CD – Classical Mushroom. They buy drugs: pills, hash-brownies, mushrooms, beer. They eat a falafel.

‘You ready?’

‘Think so.’

They push their way through the crowd, stopping from time to time to dance or stare at hippies on acid contorting their faces like children stepping into cold water. At the front of the main floor, at the foot of the DJ booth and the towers of speakers, is a low dias. Leather couches in primary colours are placed haphazardly on the deck, in which party-people are slouched unconscious or sitting up conversing in sign language through the thunder of noise coming from only a few feet away. Between the furniture manic teenagers in muddy clothes bounce. David and Absalom search for Henry.

On one of the couches, obscured by a wall of jumping bodies, is a small man wearing a thin moustache and a full-length ermine coat. A shirtless boy in leather pants sits under each monochrome arm. The man has a sharp face and pale skin. His black hair is split into a tight side-parting in much the same manner as his lips are split into a tight grin. His eyes (polecat’s eyes, weasel’s eyes) fall on David and Absalom, standing on the edge of the crowd, shaking slightly in the breeze blowing from the speakers. He kisses his companions goodbye and makes his way towards the pair. Absalom points: ‘There, that’s him.’

The man shakes their hands and gestures towards the back of the crowd, where they can talk. They force their way back through the hyperactive throng and are soon walking through rows of tents, the noise and light diminishing behind them.

‘Absalom, I presume?’ says the man, in a high-pitched voice with a distinct Ivy-League precision and pompousness.

‘Yes. Henry, I presume?’

‘Indeed. And David?’

‘Yes.’

‘It’s a pleasure. Let me show you to my little tent, where we can speak more comfortably.’

The ‘little tent’ is really a bower of red muslin. An oversized man with a bald head and a black suit stands outside. He holds open a fold in the fabric, letting in Henry and the two guests. From the inside the walls of the construction glow red and undulate gently in the night-breeze. Above them is nothing but cold air and stars. A four-poster bed, a table (on which is a circle of lit candles) and two chairs rest on the dry grass. Henry back-flops onto the bed and ushers them into the chairs.

‘Speak to me,’ he says.

‘We are really here to hear from you,’ says David.

‘And why should I speak to you?’

‘Well, is there something you want in exchange?’

Henry gives Absalom a lascivious leer. ‘Perhaps.’

Instantly belligerent, Absalom begins to object, but David holds him back.

‘Seriously. What do you want?’

Henry turns to Absalom. ‘I’m glad you’ve come to me, Absalom, although I’m not sure how you found me. I want what you want: I want you to go to Fort Campbell tomorrow. I want you to present yourself at the indaba and proclaim yourself chief. I want you to live a rich and prosperous life. I want David to be your legal advisor. I want him and his firm to look after your family’s interests.’

Henry raises his brows as if all this were self-evident.

‘First you explain to me what happened to my family-’

‘- and what I’m doing here –’ adds David.

‘- and I’ll consider doing what you ask.’

‘You’ll consider it! Of course you’ll consider it. Go from a pauper to a prince. What more could you want?’

‘Why do you want all this?’ asks David. ‘Why do you care about what we do? Who are you anyway and what are you doing here?’

‘Easy tiger, one step at a time. My real name you’ll never know. As for what I’m doing here, let’s just say... I’m on vacation. And if you don’t ask about my reasons, I won’t ask about yours.’

‘Who murdered my family?’ asks Absalom.

Henry’s lips tighten around his teeth. ‘Not one for formalities, are we? For what it’s worth, I’m sorry it happened. If I’d known your family was in trouble I might have saved them, but it was too late. You are the last Thembeke I can save.’

‘What about my connection to all this?’ interrupts David. ‘Did you get Simon to send me here?’

‘Yes. I can’t exactly go driving around South Africa looking for someone. Would ruin my vacation.’

‘And you are a connection between CES and the World Bank?’

‘If you say so. What I am is of no interest to you.’

‘Answer his question,’ says Absalom. ‘I will not work with someone who keeps secrets. Perhaps you are the murderer?’

David continues: 'Is it something to do with the MPLA camp? With the underground cell? Hey? The cell you shared with Simon and Michael and Big Mandla? Should I ask you or should I ask elsewhere? Maybe other people know the answer?'

'You've done your homework, my boy.'

'Yes, Mister CIA. Now, are you going to talk to us or not?'

The American pauses and stretches out on the bed, something narcotic happening in his veins. He appraises his two guests, his eyes darting from one to the other.

'If you repeat this information to anyone, whatsoever, you will end up like the rest of the Thembeke. You understand?' (Ya un-dur-stained?)

'Of course.'

'Lets see... in 1976 an operation in South-Eastern Angola went wrong. We had been dropped behind enemy lines and were moving through the bush towards an enemy camp. We didn't know whether it was a base for the ANC, the MPLA or SWAPO. We didn't know what forces they had there. Headquarters wanted the information to plan the summer offensive. But a MIG fighter – I don't know where the fuck it came from – flew right over us. We didn't even hear it until it was nearly gone. Ten minutes later we were surrounded. These guys, you don't know them. Death is fun for them. They get bored in the bush, so they find new ways to kill someone.'

'I watched them chop up my troop with machetes. Starting with the feet and the hands and working their way inwards, towards the heart. I was kicked to the floor. A boy with a machete was standing above me. I told him to suck my cock. When he realised I was an American his weapon stopped in mid-air. I was worth more than your average foot-

soldier. I saw his boot coming towards my face, then I woke up in a hole in the ground in all kinds of pain. I stayed there for almost a year.'

'In the hole were two officers from the SANDF: your father and Simon. A few months later Big Mandela appeared, beaten nearly to death. That's all there was in that cell: four muddy walls, a mud floor, and the four of us. They dropped food from above. Poured water down on us once a day, if we were lucky. I'll spare you the details.'

'We had to stick together if we were going to survive. We made a promise to always look after each other and to look after each other's families if one of us died. These promises are what kept us alive. We have to keep them, even today. We survived: Big Mandela escaped by pretending to turn sides. Eventually South African troops captured the base and freed the rest of us. I spent six months in hospital: dehydration, malnutrition, multiple fractures, kidney failure, septicaemia.'

'The shrink back at the pickle-factory recommended that I be let go. I was transferred to the Foreign Office, then to a private security firm, where I've been since then. We specialise in... alternative methods of negotiation. Our firm is sometimes employed through independent consultants to help the World Bank and its partners secure its policies in places where it's desirable.'

*Desirable for whom?* thinks David.

'Our client was reporting obstacles to development on the Eastern coast of South Africa. There was a large contract at stake and the investors wanted to minimise their risk. They had taken strong conventional measures, but with little success. I was in my office in DC when I got the phone call. They had just made the amateur mistake of killing off the opposition, without even consulting me. As they now know, this often only leads to more

problems. The investors had ordered CES to take decisive measures. The corporation gave their local agency, R&R, responsibility for action. They spoke to the Mnanzi, who spoke to the Moroccans, who spoke to Solomon. Now who do you blame? A board of directors in DC? A gangster from Alice? What's happened has happened, but I can guarantee your safety from now on. In the back seat of my car, on the way to the airport, I had already formulated my plan. The board back in DC had approved it by the time I landed in Johannesburg. A change in strategy. You.'

Absalom leans forward, stares at the ground between his feet. He says nothing.

David interrupts: 'So you phoned your old friends Simon and Michael, giving them a tip... through the grape-vine.'

'Yes.'

'If they found an heir the dam would be built, and you would keep your weird old promises to your friends.'

Henry hooks sharp little canines around his upper lip.

'You're smarter than you look, kid.'

'But why...'

'Ah, yes. Well, Simon or Michael's direct involvement would have been too risky for them and might have compromised me. But *you* suited all our aims: Michael had personal control over you, Simon professional control. Simon wanted someone close to him, in his firm, to be on the job. Someone who, if they discovered the full story, would keep it to themselves. Someone he could keep an eye on. Michael wanted you to, as he put it, become *een van die manne*. He seems to think you're a frivolous waster. Imagine that!'

David feels numb, dumb. He does not reply to Henry.

‘You look a bit, how do you say, under the weather,’ says Henry. ‘Do you want a little help from my friend?’

Henry extends an open palm, on which is a thin glass tube filled with what looks like purple gas.

‘No thanks. I say no to drugs.’

‘As you wish,’ he says, and cracks the glass in half, inhales the vapour. His pupils quickly dilate. He sits up, crawls across the bed, and leans his face into David’s. He can smell the mint on his breath.

‘Just trying to loosen you up. Don’t be so afraid of me. I won’t bite. Not if you don’t ask.’

David shrinks back into his chair. He wants to be left alone to examine his memories in the sickly new light that has been cast on them. He is a missile, a gauntlet, a piece of cloth. Forces beyond his comprehension have already launched him into this trajectory. His life is already drawn out like a dotted line. He must just fill in the blanks - bomb, threaten, cover up. He looks across at Absalom. From the mask of his face he guesses he feels the same way. Who is he to change his course? David feels bubbles of rebellion forming on his overheated heart.

Henry leans forward again. ‘What, you afraid of being this close to a man? You shouldn’t be. Not if you’re anything like your dad.’

‘What?’

‘Yes, my cute little lawyer. It was part of the promise. We were that close, like lovers. We were starved, beaten up, sick and dirty. That was the only pleasure they didn’t deny us. It was the only pleasure we had.’

A bubble rises from David's heart and pops in his mouth.

'Don't lie to me!' he shouts, rising and swiping his chair, sending it flying across the tent.

Henry stands up, smiling, relishing the confrontation.

'What's wrong, *boytjie*?' Can't you face the truth? Do you think it's my fault?'

'Who are you to tell me this? You liar. You're a professional liar!'

'What do you know about what happens in war? What do you know about prison time? My little South African friend? Answer me!'

'Nothing.'

'What do you know about what happens between four men, alone and abandoned in the bush? What exactly do you know?'

'I know my dad's not...'

David paces up and down the tent, barely able to control his temper.

'He's not gay you stupid boy. Get over yourself. Everyone did it in the army. That's the whole point of the army: find your butch side by killing people, find your bitch side by getting fucked to oblivion.'

David stops pacing, collects himself, picks up the chair and forces himself to sit down.

'What?' sneers Henry.

'Nothing.'

'David?'

'Yes?'

'Where is Absalom?'

In the dark corner where Absalom was sitting, the chair is empty. Henry eyes David suspiciously.

‘I don’t know.’

‘You little fuck-‘

‘Hey hey hey, we’re not working together. He didn’t even want to be my client. He’s run away from me too, along with all my drugs.’

Henry freezes in mid-curse and bursts into hysterical laughter. In between gasping breaths he tells David to fuck off and not come back, and reminds him that if he repeats anything he’s heard he’ll end up like a Thembeke. David turns his back on Henry and wanders back through the rows of tents, lost for words, lost for thoughts.

A pale crest of sky caps the eastern mountains. Dawn is not far off. He sits under one of the acacia trees at the edge of the dance-floor, watching people work themselves into a froth anticipating the sunrise. Absalom is gone. He must have heard what he needed to hear.

Bewildered, David heaves himself to his feet. Sprinklers have gone off in the crowd. He skirts the mud-splattered jumping dancers, plods back down the footpath through the dry trees, and catches the bus back to the abandoned parking lot. Colour seeps into the eastern horizon. When he reaches his car he slides *Infected Mushroom* into the frontloader, opens all the windows, and races down the dirt roads, leaving a plume of dust hanging in the tangerine air while the last stars fade in the sky.

He reaches the N1 and turns right, towards Cape Town. The Great Karoo stretches its flat expanse to the distant horizon, amber-edged, broken only by the jackal’s teeth of far-off hills. Space here is as God intended it: boundless, clear, weightless. The road is a giant black

ribbon dropped by some careless titan who has fled to more hospitable climes, leaving the place ringing with an abandoned energy. David keeps his pedal to the floor, waiting for an accident. He reasons to himself that Henry was lying: he was on drugs; he was belligerent; he wanted to keep David confused. Yet the nagging feeling of incompleteness that has knotted up his thoughts since leaving Cape Town is gone. Simon's offer, Rana's reluctance, his father's threats. Simon coming round to their house in PE, sitting on the stoep with Michael, nursing cigarettes and whiskey, talking old times.

His phone rings: Simon. He asks David whether he has found Absalom.

'Yes. I've found your little friend.'

'Excellent.'

'But he's gone now.'

'What?'

'He's gone. He decided to leave. You know...'

'What are you talking about? What's going on, David?'

David can barely breathe. He is losing control of the car, which swerves heavily across the road.

'What's going on, Simon?' he says, mocking the smug tone.

'Listen, my boy-'

'Your boy?'

'What's your problem? Do you have Absalom or not?'

'Absalom just wanted to know who killed his family. He's gone now. I don't know what he's up to, but that's his story. He knows the facts. He'll make up his own mind.'

‘Are you messing with me? I don’t want to get nasty with you, my boy. You’d better find him and bring him here. The meeting is today. He’d better show up.’

‘You’re not listening to me, Simon. Absalom – is – gone. I’m driving through the Karoo on my way back home.’

‘You’ll regret this. Didn’t I tell you this client was worth a lot of money? We could all have retired on this. Gone to Mauritius or the Seychelles, whatever. Now you-‘

‘Listen Simon: he just wanted to know what happened. The truth. We spoke to an old friend of yours. Henry.’

The other side of the line is silent.

‘Who?’

‘Henry? You remember? The guy you were fucking in Angola, the-‘

A string of expletives crackle over the phone.

‘No!’ David is screaming. ‘You’d better explain to me! If you want to make me part of some twisted old-boys club, you can go-‘

‘OK, relax, relax. Fine, we didn’t tell you everything. But we were just looking after you, looking after Absalom. What’s your problem anyway? We were going to make you rich, give you a future.’

‘What’s my problem? Are you joking? You can’t just pull my strings and-‘

‘No no no. Don’t you understand?’

‘What, that you and my father and Big Mandla and Henry were all-‘

‘Sh, sh. That was long ago. We weren’t just keeping old promises. Your father wanted you to make something of yourself. Something he could be proud of. Not just drinking your life away and partying with the moffies in Green Point. And I wanted you to

succeed. To be able to live a good life. So you can do what you want. Be with who you want.'

'What?'

'David, I know you're in love with my daughter. I've never really been able to look after her, but maybe you can. You know, the younger generation and all that. I just wanted you to... have something. Find Absalom. He'll make you rich.'

Whiteness spreads over David's vision, as if he is looking into a light-bulb. He nearly drives off the road. He steadies himself, forces himself to breathe.

'What are you talking about?'

'Don't pretend you don't know. Who do you think is Angeline's father?'

David's memory flashes back to the years in PE. Simon, drunk, would wonder down to the bottom of the garden to 'say hello' to Patience. Angeline's bloody camera, just a present. That was why his mother let Patience keep the baby: she knew it wasn't Michael's.

'So that's why you wanted *nog een van die manne. Snaaks ne?*'

'Yes. Please don't tell Angeline. I'm a married man. I have family, friends.'

'Oh, oh, so now you ashamed? You feel guilty? Sleepless nights Simon? That's why you always look so tired. Now who's the seuntjie here?'

'Listen you little shit. This is all beside the point. I was just keeping my promises, looking out for myself as well. So what? Just go find Absalom and shut up about Angeline. You'll be lucky if I don't call down Solomon's boys on you if you give me any more hassles. You think this is a game? Are we playing Barbie? Go and find that boy and bring him to me now! I'll find some other dickhead to look after my daughter.'

‘Don’t threaten me! I can make my own calls. If anything happens to me, or Angeline, I’ll have you thrown in a place that will make Angola look like the Hilton. And if you’re a good boy I might not tell her, and the rest of the firm, and your wife, and your fucking golf club!’

While Simon curses and threatens, David’s thoughts flash from one image to the next, horrified. Angeline’s clear green eyes, her hawkish look when she’s angry. Patience: silent, dusting, distant. What was she doing? What strange forces drove them together?

‘Did you love Patience?’ asks David, through the hail of expletives.

‘Did I love her? No. I was just fucking her. I gave her a little money sometimes, to buy a dress or something. Or to send to her family in Butterworth. So what? What’s your point?’

David is suddenly bored with the conversation. It is a non-sequitur.

‘I’m quitting my job Simon. Find another clerk.’

Simon starts to say something, but David doesn’t hear because he throws the phone out the window without hanging up. From behind him comes the faint sound of the phone smashing against the tar. He slows down, a weight dropped from his shoulders. He feels like he has been set free.

The sun has risen over the eastern horizon, flooding the Great Karoo with light. David breathes in the last of the cool night-air. Cape Town: 775km. He rolls the last of the Pick ‘n Pay bag supply and blows the smoke out the sun-roof, remembering every strange visit from Simon, every bitter curse from his father, all the meek accommodations of his mother. Patience’s strange silence. Angeline’s blissful innocence. Eventually he is tired of thinking. He has done enough thinking already. Now it is time for action. He turns the

music to full thumping volume and holds his hand out the window, brushing the horizon with his fingertips.

Another warm summer day, with nothing but a few translucent cirrus clouds, high and alone, between the baking earth and the cobalt-blue sky. He pushes on, still unable to piece together his thoughts. Emerging from the Bain's Kloof tunnel he sees Table Mountain for the first time and is flushed with nostalgia and security. The mountain stands. On autopilot, he drives to his apartment. The inside is as neat as he left it, except for a cup half-full of cold tea and an unmade bed. Here he feels wrapped in safety. He takes a box of orange juice from the fridge and sips it on the balcony, watching the city breathe its easy life. He showers and makes a half-hearted attempt to unpack. On his pillow is a note from Georgina:

*I am going to London on the Friday-night flight. Phone me when you get this message. Otherwise, have a nice life. It's been real. I will always love you. Georgina.*

This message is coded: she is giving him a final chance to redeem himself. His knees buckle and he collapses onto the unmade bed, his weight releasing Georgina's sugary perfume from the folds of linen. She must have slept here last night, waiting for him. He wishes for nothing more than to phone her and beg her not to go and say that it is time for their childish games to end. Yet he knows that the spiral of retribution would go on. Perhaps one day they will start again, when she has sated the little monster on her shoulder, when he has finally heard the secret that has been whispering at the edge of his hearing for so long. He suddenly misses her, a pang of loss.

He lies on his back and stares at the ceiling, his thoughts freewheeling. As tired as he is, he cannot sleep, and the thought of Georgina packing her bags, holding back brittle tears, weighs on his mind. He hauls himself off the bed and smokes a cigarette on the balcony, out of habit watching the smoke fade into the heat-hazed sky. It suddenly occurs to him: it's a perfect day for the beach. Where better to reconstruct his mojo, to hide from thoughts of fallen blonde angels, than under the hammer of the sun. He lights another cigarette and paces through the flat locating baggies, beach towel, sun-cream, MP3 player.

The long drive has blown off the grass and the alcohol, and he feels startlingly sober. Even the mountain, as he ascends Kloof Nek, seems fresher. Down on the beach he spreads out his towel, soaks up the beauty, and watches water evaporate from sun-bathing models. Yet he cannot escape the spiralling thoughts of Georgina: that he has made a great mistake, that he must run to the nearest phone and call her, beg forgiveness. But he sits still, sweating in the sun, and draws spirals in the sand with his finger. A beautiful girl catches his eye from across the beach, just from the seductive way she walks on sand. She approaches him in confident strides. It looks like Angeline, her gaze questioning him, but a glint in the sun catches his eyes – perhaps it is no more than a shadow falling across the face of a stranger.

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